

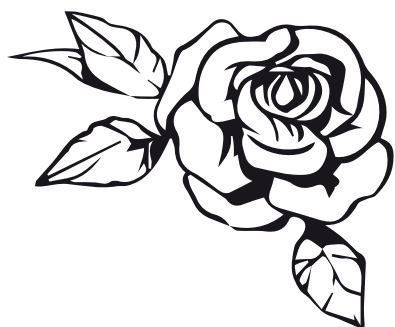
BELLA AND CHAIM

The Story of Beauty and Life



Sara Rena Vidal

Bella and Chaim



AND



#1

BELLA AND CHAIM

The Story of Beauty and Life

Sara Rena Vidal



‘Bella’, meaning beautiful in French and Latin, is also God’s Promise, from Isabelle, in Hebrew. The rose symbolises Beauty. ‘Chaim’ means life and *l’chaim* is a Jewish toast ‘to life’. The symbol is the Hebrew letter *chai* which means life and is also the number eighteen.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE REGARDING THE ELEMENTS

This telling – a mingling of voices that flow such that past becomes ever-present – is guided by a structure that, while not obvious, is deliberate.

MY MEMORY FRAGMENTS

Parts One, Three, Five, Seven, Nine, Eleven and Thirteen are comprised of extracts adapted from my childhood memoir: *The Making of Plans* (unpublished, 1949–59), journal entries (1992–99) and reflections (2006–16).

BASIA AND HENIEK'S STORY

Parts Two, Four, Six, Eight, Ten and Twelve (chapter 1–24) comprise Basia and Heniek's story of the pre-war period, the 1939–43 Warsaw Ghetto and the period 1944–49, as told to and uncovered by me. The whole contains selected memory fragments and is interspersed with:

- prose poems of longing and gratitude (mostly from 2009)
- inserts which include:

Basia's oft repeated phrases of recollection and longing.

Heniek's revealed insights

My thoughts, findings and reflections 2006-2016

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

These comprise two aspects:

Facts and Numbers with Hindsight: further factual information, post-event analysis and newspaper headlines;

Imagine Being in Their Shoes

*These sections –
gleaned from the real-time journals of those who perished
and the recollections of those who survived –
offer detail and insight to things
my parents did not tell me,
of the events in the Warsaw Ghetto.*

AFFIRMATION

Reflections on Living the Questions:

four instances of insight and a conclusion that is also a beginning.



Language: each section is written using the idiom of the time. Preference is given for the words used by victims and by survivors as found in the records and in their verbal testimonies. Also ‘he’, when used, if appropriate, includes ‘she’.

*And to them will I give in my house and within my walls
an (everlasting) memorial and a name ...
that shall not be cut off.*

Isaiah²

*... the past is what is real and true,
while history is merely what someone recorded.*

Andy Andrews³

*Once upon a time there was a man.
He was and he is for we tell his story.
He has been because we are.
Once upon a time there will be a man since
we plant Olive groves for him
and we wish that he should enjoy their yield.*

Agnes Heller⁴

In which my longing for that which is lost
as well as for that which might yet be
as told from memory fragments, journal jottings,
and delving into history past and present,
intertwining with my parents' stories of more than survival,
traverses despair to find transformation, home, and gratitude.
So the generations will know, and choose life
– after all it is a commandment.⁵

For Bella and Chaim. And for those to come.

PART ONE

LIGHT IN THE DARK

I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD

Bella's Longing for a White Cloth

*We were lying there in the dark.
Me and your daddy. Unable to move.
Eighteen months in a hole in the ground ...
I thought I would go mad. But I saw a white tablecloth ...*

Here is the hole in the ground,
the bunker with no space even to sit, let alone stand.
Lying down in this hole is a young man.
Next to him is a young woman.
With her eyes wide open,
stilling the images and daemons tearing her mind apart,
she holds back the enveloping dark by conjuring an image;
always the same scene, a *presque-vu* of anticipation.
A table laid out for the Sabbath.
A long table set with a crisp starched white cloth,
a golden plaited egg-loaf,
a pair of candlesticks with waiting-to-be-lit candles ...
Hush; she listens for the tender sound of familiar footsteps ...
Yes. Any moment her mother will come;

then will come her father and her sisters.

No. She knows that is not possible.

So she summons her God; the one whose name must not be spoken.

The one who declared as his First Commandment:

I am the Lord your G-d who has taken you out of the land of Egypt ... ⁶

Of this deity, in-whom-she-no-longer-believes,

having no other to take his place, she asks,

‘Let it be at least I will one day have the white *Shabbos*⁷ cloth.’

Must Not Wake My Mummy: Melbourne 1949

Dense dark.

A baby cries.

Is it me?

White light.

Ah-ah-ah, kotki dwa, szarobure obydwa,

nic nie będa robiły, tylko Sare bawiły ...

Oh, oh, kittens two, grey and beige both,
nothing will they do, just with Sara play.

Black dots on the ground ...

If I stand on one, I'll fall forever.

HELP!

Sha. Sha. Go back to sleep. *Frère Jacques ... Frère Jacques ...*

Dormez vous ... Dormez vous. Sonnez les matines ...

Sonnez les matines ... Ding dang dong. Ding dang dong ...

‘WAKE UP MRS ROTSTEIN! IT’S SIX O’CLOCK!’

Morning sunlight makes a bright splash on the white door. I stand in the corridor and wait. A tired voice, the voice of the lady who will soon be my beloved godmother, comes from behind the closed door.

‘Go awaay, Sara. It is too early.’

‘I want to play.’

‘Go and wake your muzzer.’

‘My Mummy is asleep.’

‘Go awaay, Sara.’

Let myself out of the big old house; on hands and knees I crawl
under tall trees through a carpet of spring flowers: blue forget-me-nots,
white lily-of-the-valley, and sweet-smelling pink flowers
which I will learn are called bergenia.

The street beckons. The gate opens easily. I am on the street.
The beach – just a few houses away; no one in sight. Hop, skip,
running and twirling on a long stretch of yellow sand in golden light.
All this space all to myself.

What is that moving speck in the distance? It is a lady. She walks a
dog. She comes right up to me. Her voice is horrible to my ears.

‘Little girl, how old are you? Nearly four?! Where is your mummy?
Your mummy should not let you out by yourself. There are bad people,
someone might hurt you. Go home.’

She glares at me so. She watches me.

So home I go, feet dragging, thinking ...

My Mummy is so beautiful: her laugh, her rosy cheeks,
her round brown eyes and long, curling brown hair so soft to the touch,
silly yucky lady-from-the-beach, if she knew my Mummy she would
know that it is not my Mummy’s fault.

Anyway, it is too early ... my Mummy is asleep.

I Learn of Grandmothers: Melbourne 1952

‘Wake up Mummy!’

Mummy stretches, sighs, opens her eyes. She sees me but, instead of
giving me her usual good-morning smile, she looks puzzled and says,
‘Why did you wake me? I was home, home with my mother ...’

I reply, ‘I’m sorry, Mummy.

It is time for you to get up. I will be late for school.’

She takes me in her arms. Holds me close. Questions fill my head:
Where are these people you long for?

When will we see them?

But I do not ask.



It is 1952, I am six, finished with the 'bubs'. I am in grade one at South Yarra Primary School, just a short walk through Domain Park from our flat in Park Street. I can read and write. The words in our readers tell many stories and we are writing with lead pencils now. No more chalk or crayons.

The twins, Cheryl and Laurel, with radiant smiles, dark brown ringlets, matching dresses, are definitely the most popular girls in the school; every day at play and lunchtimes in the concrete schoolyard their friends surround them. I want to join in, but I hang back.

One sunny day, after we have stood in queues to collect our small glass bottle of fresh milk – yummy with thick cream on top – and I am sitting alone in the shelter shed, one of the twins – I think it is Laurel – comes over and says, 'Sarena, come and play with us.'

I bask in the glow of their friendship. Then one day they invite me to come to their home in Prahran; Mummy says okay.

That is how, soon after, I find myself skipping with them through narrow streets, passing houses that share their sidewalls with their neighbours and have small garden behind low timber fences.

Their house, of wood with a corrugated iron roof, is cosy, dark, musty. In an alcove, a lady with permed white hair sits at a sewing machine. They introduce me. 'Granny, this is Sara.'

She turns, smiles, keeps on fixing lace to a flouncy skirt.

Back home I look around our bright airy flat and I do not mind that we do not live in a house. As I inspect my mop of black curls in the mirror in Mummy's dressing table I think I would not be me with ringlets.

My plain clothes – hand-me-downs and often red – look fine.

But ... But ...

Now I know about grandmothers, oh how I want to have a grandmother. A mother for my Mummy.

My heart pounding, I ask Mummy,
'Where is my grandmother? Where is my twin?'

She gazes at me; she hesitates. I plead with her,
'Please Mummy tell me!'

Staring deep into my eyes, holding me by both hands,
Mummy Tells Me The Truth.

'Your grandparents are dead. Your cousins, aunts,
their husbands and children, all are dead.
Your twin is dead. I did not have enough for two.
You were born first. You are alive. You are a big girl – nearly seven.
You are the strong one; Daddy and I love you.'
'Mummy,' I whisper, afraid to ask, but asking,
'Why did they all die?'
Her reply is as if confiding a secret:
'Because of the war.
They are dead because of the war.'

*So many questions unasked and unanswered,
but my need to tell is strong;
delving into Pandora boxes, setting memory in the record,
I bring you my parents' story,
as told to me in vignettes and dioramas;
words – being flawed and fragmented –
convey, even resonate in events unfolding today,
but they are not the thing.
It is the dark and light of my mother's longing
that both wakes me from deepest sleep
and motivates me through my days.*

*This feeling is more than Anemoia⁸ –
longing for a time I've never known;
I've found no word or phrase as yet to encapsulates this longing.
The Welsh word Hiraeth (HEER-eyeth) is a starting point:*

*... a homesickness for a home to which you cannot return,
a home which maybe never was;
the nostalgia, the yearning, the grief for lost places.
To feel Hiraeth is to feel a deep incompleteness
and recognise it as familiar.⁹*

*Add to that:
immeasurable loss of entire family branches and trunks,
knowledge of what man can and does do, to, and for, his fellow man;
thus armed with courage to face the facts,
uncover immutable moments of treasured memories.
Hold onto belief that even in the darkest dark, you can find a light.
Mix well to make a brew potent and consoling
so long as memory persists.
Make a new word to encapsulate:
Atoh-dachaia.¹⁰*

*Thus armed with gratitude –
Come with me.*

PART TWO

PICTURE (IM)PERFECT

Warsaw pre-September 1939

NO GOD BUT ME

*'Why did you wake me? I was home with my mother.
My mother was such a nice lady. My father was so nice.
My sisters, the beautiful one and the clever one, were there.
Everything was so nice. Why did you wake me?
Oh how I want to be back home.
Home when the world was nice.'*

*'Did you buy and sell in good faith?
Did you have a set time for study?
Did you raise a family?'*

A saying from The Talmud.¹¹

CHAPTER 1: THE LAST SPRING

My mother's nice world is Poland. In the verdant forests of Świder, in a holiday cottage owned by her parents, she was born on 22 August 1923. Named Bella, known as Basia, she and her sisters, Zosia and Celina, immersed in the privileged life of a loving middle-class family living in a Jewish quarter, thrive in exciting, bustling Warsaw.

Basia's father is Pinkus Birenbaum. Pinkus comes from a village.

*What was it called? I don't remember, but it was
so small that people would joke that if you gave
a yawn while travelling through you would miss it.
Oh, I remember now. Podelane – Wieś.*

His father Eliakim has two sons¹² from a first marriage.

Pinkus is prosperous. A wholesaler in cotton and wool, he is of medium height, dark-haired, olive-skinned, portly, cosmopolitan; as a lover of good food, he even eats delicious forbidden ham when away on business. On ordinary days he sits at the table with his head uncovered without any hat or *yarmulke*, and on the Sabbath, as it is a bit far to walk, he catches a taxi to the Great Tłomackie Synagogue, but, as work of any kind on the Sabbath – which includes driving – breaks a commandment, he gets out a little before his destination, not to be seen.

Basia's mother is Rena Birenbaum nee Czosnek. Rena, pretty, capable, stylish, the youngest of fourteen children of which seven have survived childhood, came from Kraków, but was born in Działoszyce. She dresses in the latest fashion: delightful hats and berets, knee-length

skirts, she even has a fine sable coat with a mink collar for winter. She manages her gracious home with the help of only one servant, Pola – a young Jewish girl from a small town – plus a washerwoman who comes in every fortnight. While Pola does general cleaning and cooking, Rena sees to all the shopping; in her kosher kitchen she ensures the dishes – one set for meat, the other for milk – are kept separate as laid down by *Halacha* – Jewish Law. For the minor and high holy days, she personally prepares the specialties: *challahs* (plaited egg loaf), chicken soup, *lockshen* (egg noodles), *kreplach* (dumplings), *gefilte* fish (fish patties), *kneidlech* (matzah balls), and *cholent* (bean and barley stew) for *Shabbos* lunch. The *cholent*, taken before the Sabbath to the communal bakery for slow cooking in pots that are numbered then put into the ovens on long paddles, is everyone's favourite. While waiting to collect their pot, people joke that the baker should mix the pots up so a poor man might get a rich man's pot filled with meat.

*From the fragments of my mother's anecdotes
I build a Friday night in spring 1939,
forever the last spring of this time before War came to Poland.*

With school finishing early on Fridays, the girls rush home to help in the kitchen and in the setting of the Sabbath table. When the first star in the night sky appears, the sign that joyful *Shabbos* can commence, Rena lights the two candles, covers her eyes, and blesses the candles with the traditional incantation.

*Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam,
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat.*

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe,
Who has made us holy through His Commandments
and commanded us to kindle the Sabbath light.

With everyone seated, there is silence while Pinkus intones further blessings sanctifying the wine and challah. Everyone says *omain* – amen; the challah cut into small pieces is passed around, the meal under way, tongues loosened by wine, speaking to each other in a Polish as fluent as that of any parallel Catholic home, the girls talk of many things while Pola serves the courses.

Rena surveys her brood. All is well. First, everyone is in good health. Second, tonight's meal has turned out delish. Perhaps a dash more salt in the soup? No, Pinkus assures her it is just scrumptious. Yes, she does love him, though without doubt she will have cause tomorrow to chastise him for playing cards on a Saturday, this being another irritating manifestation of his lack of respect for the many Mosaic rules. Thankfully, his irreverence pales beside his attributes: a caring husband, doting father, generous to her relatives, a good provider.

Not like her dear brother, Mayer Czosnek. Making money eludes Mayer yet neither he nor his wife Leah, known as Leyele, will accept anything from Rena. Despite abject poverty, Mayer radiates the soothing aura of a man of exalting faith. He is a sight in his full orthodox garb: a caftan and small brimmed hat.¹³ And to pray he wears a *tallis* (a fringed shawl whose every tassel is prescribed) and bound to his head and arms the *tefillin* (black leather boxes), symbolic and mystical elements of the ritual. Pious Leyele, her head covered by the prescribed *sheitel* – that wig looking not at all becoming – keeps their one-roomed apartment spotless. In their crowded yet organised home, Leyele and Mayer earn a pittance by spending their days and nights overlocking knitted fabric for a manufacturer. In this building, they live, work, and even pray, because conveniently located on the ground floor is a *shteibel* – a prayer house. Their daughter Sara is still at home; how do they manage?

It would be nice if only Leyele and Mayer would come to partake of the Friday feast, or lunch on Saturday. However, her own brother will not eat in her home for, though she follows the Jewish dietary laws of *kashrut* with meticulous attention, he says it is *trayf*, not kosher enough for him. At least Leyele pops in for a cup of tea on Saturday. No, she would not like Pinkus to be religious like that. Give thanks to her dear blessed parents for making this *shiddach*. Make sure to emphasise to the girls the wisdom of this tradition of arranged marriages. Tell them: 'My parents told me I would learn to love him and I have.'

The gifts of her marriage multiply with the passage of time:

knowledge of continuance; delight in the present reality of watching her girls grows and mature. A son would have been a blessing to carry on the family name, but her princesses will bring sons to the family. *Peu, peu*. Out of custom she makes the spitting sound, to ward off the evil eye, and considers each daughter.

Zosia, the eldest, is named Sophia for wisdom. Just seventeen, charming, small, slim, graceful, a Dorothy Lamour look-alike; the young men flock, drinking in her charm. Of late, Zosia is favouring young Adam Poznanski, whose family came from Łódź. A nice boy, good family, well-off – it could be a match. But she is too young. Rena resolves to keep an eye on her daughter.

As for her middle one, while telling Basia that she is clever in her own way – that she will turn out best of all – Rena, with a mother's protective instinct, worries. Basia, though not as silly as she seems, in fact clever in a down-to-earth way, is altogether too friendly, too careless, too carefree. Immersed in daydreams, she lacks confidence, pays scant attention to her schoolwork, and her Hebrew is abysmal. Perhaps her private Jewish school, just like the Polish schools, is concentrating too much on unnecessary subjects. And she fidgets so! Sixteen soon in August, plump, yet attractive in her own way, wholesome like the *kasha* (buckwheat) in her nickname: Basia-Kasha. Is she losing her baby fat? Indeed, all of a sudden she is quite tall and curvy – in fact delicious; peach-skin, the uncles call her. Truly, she is becoming a beauty despite that long nose. Danger looming. Rena reviews her method of protection. She'll work on Basia a little more: remind her of the perils of this world, continue instilling caution, warn again of the disgrace of fallen women.

Turning her thoughts to the baby of the family, Rena smiles with pride. Celina is her clever one, so good at schoolwork; only twelve, but she helps Basia with hers. Bookish. Serious. Ah, but it is not good for a woman to be obviously clever. Will she want a different life, perhaps that of a pioneer in far-off Palestine? Plenty of time to worry about Celushina's prospects.

Three girls, fount for emergence of the next generation.

This is what it is to be content. Thank you, God, for this family.

*But, in the World Outside, A.H. is Enacting his Vision*¹⁴

Here is some historical context

Since the end of WWI trouble has brewed in the Weimar Republic.

The Treaty of Versailles – a make-the-loser-pay, grab-what-you-can (usual European postwar tit-for-tat practice) – a departure from the 14-point peace plan proposed by the American President Woodrow Wilson, proved to be a recipe for failure which did not settle prewar disputes, and left Germany with reduced territory.

The declared elements of German angst – dishonour, defeat, denunciation (for starting the war), demilitarisation, deprivation, devaluation (financial and world-standing), damages, despair, dread (of socialism, communism and Catholicism)¹⁵ and desire (for more of everything, for revenge) – were a fertile medium for germination of nasty ideas that defy description.

In 1924, Adolf Hitler, from a Bavarian prison – where he served eight months of a five-year sentence for his failed coup – had put to paper his revelation for, and action plan of, a Utopia to restore his view of the natural world; one where the fittest reign supreme uninhibited by any moral code. Word-smithed by Rudolf Hess, *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*)¹⁶ was an instant bestseller; clear and arrogant, he'd blamed all Germany's woes on the Jews – especially the loss of WWI – and outlined what he would do: drive eastward for living space, take over the Soviet Union; share world power with the other great powers – England and the US; eliminate lesser beings: unproductive, mentally ill and handicapped, communists, Gypsies, Jews.

Germans had voted for him primarily because of his promises: to revive the economy, restore German greatness, overturn the Treaty of Versailles, and to save Germany from communism.¹⁷

It is all there.

A mission statement with background, rationale, and goals identified.

Comprehensive. Bold. Ruthless. Astute. Seductive. Dynamic. Vile.

*A.H. the leader – not mad but bad:*¹⁸

Der Führer, the Leader; A.H. did not act alone.

I call him A.H.¹⁹ so as not to speak his name.

On 30 January 1932, Germans had given government to the National Socialist German Workers' Party, the NSDAP, commonly referred to as the Nazi Party. Their slogan: *Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Führer* – One realm, one people, one leader. Democratically elected, A.H. secured office as

Chancellor with unlimited powers. Aided by the fact that Germany was well organised, he swiftly took over every aspect of German life. The Nazis' 25-point program made sweeping demands and committed all those defined as German citizens to aggression against those deemed non-citizens.²⁰

Blaming the communists for the Reichstag fire of 27 February 1933, A.H. used the pretext of national security to marshal sweeping powers that enabled his elimination of opponents, curtailment of the press, and removal of personal freedoms guaranteed in the constitution.²¹

1933 also saw *Mein Kampf* translated into English. Debated, understood; in-favour, against; ignored, discounted. Yes. No.²² Read by the world's leaders? Seemingly ignored. In any case, National Socialism²³ was seen by many as a bulwark to Soviet communism. The versions made available in English were abridged, and though much of the antisemitic vitriol was left out,²⁴ it was still an all-out hateful attack blaming every woe, especially the loss of WWI, on this tiny portion of the population. Calling for fanaticism and intolerance²⁵ A.H. advocated that 'the nationalization of our masses will succeed only when, aside from all the positive struggle for the soul of our people, their international poisoners are exterminated.'²⁶

The population of Germany in 1933 was around 60 million. Some 20 million were Catholic and 40 million Protestant. Less than 1 per cent of the total population was Jewish.²⁷ Shortly after Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer's declaration that the role of the church was to stand up for the Jews,²⁸ on 10 May 1933, students of 34 university towns burnt 25,000 'un-German books' in the 'Action Against the Un-German Spirit'. Widespread newspaper coverage, radio broadcasts of speeches, songs and ceremonial incantations went live to countless listeners.²⁹

Books burnt? Franz Kafka, Bertolt Brecht, Sholem Asch, Sigmund Freud, Ernest Hemingway, H.G. Wells, Lion Feuchtwanger, Jack London, Thomas Mann, and many others. The greatest writers and minds deemed unsuitable.

As far back as 1821, Heinrich Heine warned: 'Where they have burned books, they will in the end burn people.'³⁰

Foiling the West on 16 May 1933, just days after the book burning, making a show of accepting Roosevelt's Peace Plan, and promising to destroy armaments.³¹

So the world's newspapers told:³²

GERMANY ACCEPTS ROOSEVELT'S PEACE PLAN

Passing the Nuremberg Laws³³ in 1935, A.H. stripped the Jews of Germany of citizenship and classified them. Ever gathering control, he had long done away with all democratic parliamentary processes, crushed opposition, killed opponents, introduced conscription, banned trade unions, built on the Hitler Youth (created in 1922). He used the opportunity presented by Germany's hosting of the 1936 Olympic Games to promote an image of a new, strong, united Germany while masking its racist policies and growing militarism, thus allaying Western concerns. Businessmen, within and outside Germany, supported him, threw money at him³⁴ – fawned over him. Everyone was aroused, with secret proceedings, any dissenting voice silenced, no trial, property confiscated. The Brownshirts or Storm Troopers – the Nazi Party's paramilitary, also known as the SA – burnt homes, shops and synagogues. Thousands were incarcerated in 'holding camps'; hundreds of windows were broken in one night.³⁵ Gentiles who voiced concerns were thrown into concentration camps.

A most sinister act is unfolding: in October 1939 –
A.H. will sign the notorious T-4 Euthanasia Program.

The consummate liar, A.H. was not alone in favouring elimination of those judged unworthy of life. Indeed, his schemes could appear rational – a logical consequence of ideas on how to bring in a better world. Many Utopian visions – that of H.G. Wells, for one – generated by a genuine concern with imminent overpopulation, racial degeneration and limited availability of resources, sought answers in Social Darwinism's distortion of Darwin's 'survival of the fittest'. It was just a small step to eugenics and notions of racial purity.³⁶ A.H. took advantage of these rampant notions and applied a dynamic organic force by unifying and inspiring his ideas into being. The German populace, lauded by A.H. as Aryan thus as 'the carrier of human cultural development'³⁷ believing itself 'overwhelmed in the mixing of races',³⁸ longing for change and inured by persuasive arguments, would acquiesce: mass sterilisation programs were accepted; a medical workforce was trained; the murder of severely handicapped children was enacted with flow-on to unproductive adults and the elderly – social engineering extraordinaire. An overture to the mass exterminations to come.

And what were Russia and Italy thinking? And the countries of East Europe? All embroiled in a blatant frenzy of land grabbing.

This is a glimpse of the crazy world outside Basia's nice home.

I asked my mother, 'Why didn't you just leave?

You just had to know what was going on.'

She answered:

'Yes we knew, but we never thought it would come to us.'

Pinkus catches his wife's fond smile and divines her thoughts as she surveys the girls. He congratulates himself. Yes, the girls are flourishing in this upbringing, traditional rather than religious; thank goodness the crazy ideas sprouting all over the place have not turned their heads. Replete from the excellent meal, he casts away the longing to light a cigarette. His mind turns to pressing matters: increasing taxes, union trouble – the usual problems. But government actions in nationalising industries and turning them into monopolies are making it increasingly difficult to do business. Will they go as far as Germany? Thank God, the Birenbaum family left there long ago. He sighs.

A concerned look from Rena; a gesture to assure her that all is well. He re-engages in the thrust and parry of the table talk for a bit. The girls are debating the merits of swing music versus classical. His preference is for something he can dance to: a romantic waltz or nippy foxtrot; this swing is a touch risqué. Pinkus slips a slice of lemon into his strong black tea, takes a sip and relaxes. But dark thoughts return.

Only 25 years since the Russians saved Warsaw from German takeover, and again there is talk of war. How has it come to this so soon after the last never to be repeated horror of World War I? Things are terrible for Jews in Germany. The *Sejm*, the Polish parliament, is also emphasising differences, distorting the inclination to fairness and honour in which the Poles take pride. Surely it could not get too bad. Britain and France have promised to back Poland. War? Yes, it seems there will be war ...

Rena would love to go to Palestine – build on the land³⁹ you've bought. But that way is at present closed⁴⁰ and why uproot the family

to go to such a hostile place? Leaving behind everything in Poland is too dramatic, too drastic. Even if war comes, it will be a blitzkrieg – over in a flash. Life will go on as before. No need to worry Rena. Not on *Shabbat*.

Dear Grandfather Pinkus



I look at the one photo that I have.
You are well-dressed. Your mouth is well-formed; there is an attractive cleft to your chin. Your eyes, under furrowed brows, are thoughtful. Your nose is long. That's where Mummy got hers from. Pity she had it bobbed.

I bet that I would have had you twisted around my little finger until I was a big girl – say five – and then I'd have sat in your presence in dutiful attendance.

But later, we would have enjoyed full-on discussions.

Or would I have held my tongue?

My mother speaks of you with such loving respect.

Indistinguishable from any urbane Pole after 800 years of shared place, your mind amazed; ideas, figures, solutions zapped in dynamic flashes such that Rena and the girls teasingly called you computer-head.

To me you would have been Papa or *Zayde*.

Z as in Zion, *ay* as in say, *de* as in delight. *Zayde*.

Imagine all the fun.

Picture all the love.

Birenbaum. Pear tree. Delicious fruit. Pinkus Birenbaum.

Dear unknown Grandfather Pinkus.

I long for your gaze.

Wish I'd known you.



Smile at your sensible wife, Rena. Darling Racele. When dinner is over, light that long-awaited cigarette. Draw in its fragrance, sigh, this

time in pleasure. Look how well she keeps you in line, while deferring to you. Everything organised for your comfort and with such a sense of style. Ah, what darlings you have, what a blessing it is to lavish love on them all. Indeed, what is a man if he does not do everything in his power for his family, even take on this crazy world. Anything to keep this good life, here in Warsaw, here in Poland. Here is home.

*My mother's home; the one she wept for all through my childhood,
the one she talks of every time we speak, that home
was the place of her childhood. My home, until I married,
was always where she was. And our first home in Australia,
until I was eighteen, was in South Yarra.*

They say 'home is where the heart is' and I know this is true. It is early spring 1955; I am nearly ten. We live in a rented flat at 5/28 Park Street, South Yarra, near the Botanic Gardens where Mummy sometimes takes us after school.

Our flat is on the first floor of a two-storey building. Our door – one of four – has a protective mezuzah on the side – as do two others.

Off the long corridor are two bedrooms – the first is the one I share with my sister, Janette; she is just four and has eczema. She scratches in the night. When her asthma strikes Mummy sometimes moves Janette to her bed. Our room has two divans each with two drawers, one for bedding and the other for our treasures, and a bookcase Daddy made from a kit – with my help.

The bathroom, cold and bare, with a concrete floor painted red, is small with everything crammed in: a shower over the bath, a toilet tucked into the corner under a small window of diamond-patterned obscure glass that is hard to open, and a small basin with a mirrored cupboard above. Lying in the bath, I inhale the crisp fragrance of Blue Clinic shampoo, and if I half close my eyes, in the patterns on the shiny wall lining, I see continents and faces.

The kitchen is near the entry. A sink sits under a small window with no outlook. Next to it is a stove in a tight alcove and a small cabinet, and on the other side, blocking the back door, is a chrome and Formica-topped table with four matching vinyl chairs. Cramped and dark, here is where we eat and talk – not in the large bright dining room at the

other end of the corridor that you walk through to get to our lounge room, which looks out onto the street; here in the kitchen is where we sing along with the hit parade and listen to serials on the radio: Hop Harrigan, Captain Silver, Biggles and, if Mummy lets me stay up, my favourite, Larry Kent.

Out the back door onto a landing, down the rickety timber stairs, into an open concrete yard with rotary clothes hoists. Garages and laundries are tucked under the building; all this space is shared by several blocks of two-storey flats.

There – for two shillings – I help my Daddy wash his Holden.

My mother's washing day is Wednesday. Washing is a big job, and during school holidays, I help. Mummy works hard, scrubbing shirt collars, moving clothes, towels, sheets in and out of the big copper. Sometimes she swears in Polish, using words she tells me not to use, like '*Holera schluck cref*' whatever that means.

Now I know: *Cholera psia krew*, cholera dog's blood – spoken as an oath.

The boiling water emits steam and a not-nice soapy smell. Hot and sweaty, she tells me she never dreamt she would work like this:

her family was well off;

they had a maid, a lovely apartment, a country house.

She'd had a beautiful engagement ring

and a gold wedding band ...

Brushing away tears, she grumbles, especially about our long corridor. I remind her how close we are to my school, gardens, beaches and Luna Park, and how sunny are the bedrooms, and spacious the lounge.

She smiles at me and says, 'Yes we are lucky.'

Taking me in her arms she says,

'You and your sister, you both are my jewels.'

Then she is quiet, her eyes mist again.

I try to see what she sees. I see only her tears.

I want to tell her I know her heart is in another place, but, I only say,

'Mummy, don't be so sad.'

When eventually I did ask,

'Mummy, we are so lucky. Why are you so sad?'

She replied:

'Oh Sarele, I loved the people; all of them, they were good people.'

CHAPTER 2: MUCH TO THINK ABOUT

The Birenbaum family home is a pleasant apartment on the third floor of a three-storey block of flats at 18 Muranowska Street, Warsaw – corner of Pokorna, adjacent to the square Plac Muranowski. The building is U-shaped and backs onto another; together they form a rectangle around a courtyard where over a hundred families live. A concierge guards the only entry through iron gates that he closes at 11 pm; out-of-hours attendance attracts extra pay. If the girls come in beyond the curfew, Rena chastises, ‘Aren’t you ashamed before the concierge?’

To avoid being found wanting by this guardian-of-the-door, Basia, caught out after a night out with friends – at the pictures or doing homework – gives a soft call to Pola, the servant, not much older than Basia, asleep in the kitchen of Basia’s apartment above. ‘Polunia, Polunia.’

From the basement, an echo mocks, ‘Poo-loonia, Poo-loonia.’ Loud is this harsh voice in the still night. Turning her head towards the cracked ground level slit of a window, Basia catches a glimpse of the young, shabby, and none-too-clean girl around her own age.

Disgraced, caught locked out, Basia endeavours to appear nonchalant. Just how many are squeezed into that one subterranean room? A previous maid had lived there and Basia had once seen inside so she knows the dank despair of it and the bitter cold when snow lies thick on the ground. Terrible.

Thinking of that poverty evokes cousin Sara Czosnek, who lives in poverty such that she has to work with her parents; denied schooling she steals bits of time to devour books, never satisfying her hunger

for knowledge. Though their life is difficult, there is always food on the table. Not like this wretched lot in the basement. Basia shudders, thinking again of her bright intense older cousin, and she trembles for her. What if Uncle Mayer and Auntie Leyele find out their darling Sara is a communist?⁴¹ That she hides pamphlets under her mattress! If she is caught she could be interrogated, even executed. The whole family is in jeopardy of arrest. She believes the way to fight those who would exclude Jews is to have a society where all are equal and with everything divided according to one's needs. She says things with such passionate conviction: 'Prayer will not bring about a better world'; 'God is dead'; 'Religion is the opium of the people'. Where does she get such ideas?⁴²

Thank God! Here at last is loyal, tall, blonde Pola to open the gate; Pola won't tell on her. It is so good to be home; the boxed scroll of the *mezuzah* on the door, offering protection of God from the Angel of Death, enhances the sense of security.

Untouched by accounts of pogroms in the countryside, Basia enjoys boundless love for her city. She takes sustenance and pleasure in the felicity of all manner of outings. A walk along the boulevards, visits to shops, cafés, the Yiddish theatres, crammed in a tram zipping across the city to visit a friend or an excursion to the zoo. Everywhere one mingles with people of many nations and walks of life while immersing one's senses in aromas and colours. Closer to home, it is a delight to park oneself on a sunny park bench in the Jewish sector of the Krasiński Gardens – just a short walk via Nalewki Street – but never to the Ujazdowski Park frequented, so Rena warns, by antisemites.

And Basia loves her home. Light floods into the apartment from the huge double-hung windows and you can stick your head out or sit on one of the three balconies to shout to someone in the street or in the courtyard. As in each preceding year, birds build nests amongst the sweet blossoms, and pale-green spring leaves clothe the solitary tree's welcoming branches.

*Warsaw was renowned for its beautiful trees.
Was the courtyard tree perhaps a Linden tree?*

The birds' dulcet morning-greeting and evening-farewell songs mingle with busy sounds of the comings-and-goings of tenants and music, courtesy of the radios.

Airy, roomy, bright, this apartment has everything: a spacious dining room, three bedrooms, a separate kitchen; the bathroom boasts both an internal toilet and a full-length bath. It is heaven to luxuriate in water, hot from a coal-fired boiler, whose fire is kept going by wonderful Pola.

In the dining room there are cream-coloured damask curtains, a large Persian rug on the polished timber floorboards, a credenza for crockery and crystal glasses, a small cabinet with glass doors for miniatures, and a solid timber table and chairs which complement the timber panelling and architraves; and presiding over all this is a huge framed photo of the three girls. There is no lounge room, but a study nook with a desk and books. The parents' room – bright, spacious, furnished with cream coloured furniture including cupboard, bed and dressing-table – is off-limits to the girls.

The sisters occupy the second bedroom. Zosia, as the eldest, could have the small third bedroom to herself but chooses instead to share; so, while Pola sleeps on a folding bed in the kitchen, with her few belongings stashed in a small trunk, the third bedroom serves as a storeroom.

The girls spend hours together in their cramped haven. They have much to laugh and talk about: friends, pictures, school. Basia adores her sisters. To her, Zosia, in her secret-from-Mother, hidden-from-Father lipstick and touch of eyelash-lengthening mascara, is Dorothy Lamour incarnate. How would *she* look in lipstick? No, she doesn't dare. Not yet. One day soon. After all, as Rena instructs, a little lipstick is all right, but only prostitutes paint their faces! *Kurvas!* Disgraced, fallen women. Tight, slinky, skimpy clothes – nothing left to the imagination, eyes ringed in black, voices husky from cigarettes and wine, red lips emitting ugly words. Rena warns that such a woman has nothing special to give to a man, therefore, no prospect of a husband and eternal shame before everyone. Basia, well-schooled, mimics: fancy a woman giving away that most precious offering of a

husband's pride and honour for money!

However, despite Rena's refrain, 'Knowledge is an open window to the world', Basia is repeating Intermediate Level; a private tutor gives her extra coaching. After the holidays, she'll face final exams. She asks, 'Please God, at least a pass so I will have my *Mata Matura*. For Mamma.'

Basia has another shame, a kept secret: just last week, she caught a tram to see a boy across town. Moreover, he took the liberty to steal a kiss. Yes, she likes him, but is this how it would feel to be in love? How will she know? Her head is so full. The more she learns, the more confused she becomes. Why can nothing stay simple and beautiful like the excitement generated before *Pesach* approaches each March? The apartment spring-cleaned from top to bottom, and every corner searched for each offending crust, biscuit, or hidden packet of barley or rice. These being *chametz* – unfit for Passover – are pounced on with much laughter, disposed of one by one, until everyone is convinced everything's ready.

Now, with *Rosh Hashanah* – Jewish New Year – approaching in September, will she have new clothes? Everyone wears their best when they go to synagogue on these two days marking the New Year. She'll be a year older and her old coat just will not do. A new coat? Yes! Plus new black patent-leather shoes with a small heel – and silk stockings – no more flatties or white socks.

Oh, there is so much to do; she resolves to talk to Mamma.

*As my mother told me these things,
I absorbed her longing for Rena.
On a wintry night, 20 June 2009, words spilled out.*

Longing for Mamma of my Mummy

*Rena, unknown grandmother of mine,
as I type, you look out of the photo frame
as if you see me.*

*Your soft neck evokes
a womanly plumpness.*

*A beret of unknown colour merges with
your hair. I do not know you:*

I have not felt the touch of your hand.

Nor heard the music of your voice.

You never shushed my cries.

At every opportunity,

Mummy invokes

your thirst for knowledge,

your patience, and kindness.

I know the ordinary details:

homemaker, loving wife, adored mother, benefactress.

Your library grew day by day:

Steinbeck, Victor Hugo, Tolstoy.

Is it from you I get my love of books?

Tears gather ...

(My other grandmother, Sara, is present,

made visible in remnant family – here in Australia.)

Of your line, there is only my mother.

Is she like you?

She is not like me.

But tonight, I see a bit of myself in the expression

of the indistinct image of your sad dark eyes,

the heart shape of your face, your widow's peak,

the restrained smile of your painted mouth. Is that a touch of mascara?

Wait! Go back. Sad eyes? Why did I say that?

Why would they be sad?

My life soaks up your absence.



Rena, at 43, knows where the lines separating the various duties and aspects of her life are drawn. Certainly, everything is *bershert*, predestined, but one can still take charge: of self, life, and husband. A well-educated woman married to an uneducated businessman; let

people scoff at the match – it works just fine. Apart from watching over the physical and spiritual wellbeing of her daughters, Rena ensures her husband's unconditional place as master in his own home. To shout at the girls is not on. As for any physical disciplinary action, such degradation is unconceivable! A silent look, cool withdrawal, a gentle reprimand: 'Your children will give you back,' is still sufficient to keep the girls' enthusiasms in check. Her tools of admonishment and reminders are administered with skill, to ensure the maturing girls maintain a respectful demeanour towards their father, never bothering him with feminine problems. Indeed, for them to answer back is unthinkable. In this home there is a place for everything with everything in its place, a role for everyone and everyone knows their role; joy guaranteed.

*This eulogising of you comes from my mother's memorialising.
But you were more than a woman of love and duty.
The unrest in the countryside and in the Sejm was surely troubling.
Family had gone to Colombia due to antisemitism in Poland.
Things had changed: unkempt students barred from university hung
about; religious brethren in the villages and smaller shtetlekh
forecast the Messiah was on his way or already here!⁴³
Did you worry that the Hassids with their ecstatic ways
gave ammunition to those National Democrats
who sought to decry all Jews?⁴⁴
And you were a Zionist. As far back as 1937 you tried
to convince Pinkus to leave Poland and take the family to Palestine.
Whatever was to come, did you believe God would provide?
Seeing Pinkus was determined to stay, and you would not leave without
him, did you challenge God to get more involved?
I imagine you did.*

'Don't turn your back on your people because some displease you! Even the *kurwa* does what she does to survive! Ah, don't tell Basia I said that! Oh, these stories from Germany are awful. Are you angry at those that assimilated and forgot their covenant with you? Even here some have converted – such a loss; the death of that person as a

Jew, their parents mourning them – sitting *shiva* – as if the convert is dead.⁴⁵ Is that why all this is happening? Can it be punishment?

‘Don’t forget most of us are good people. Not perfect. But we try. It is not easy to be faithful to our ways; if we are to keep the Sabbath, we trade five days, the Christians trade six.’⁴⁶ And kosher meat is hard to get and expensive. Are you testing us? Our sages say *Si fueris Romae, Romano vivito more* – When in Rome do as the Romans do. Are we not trying to do as the Poles, while keeping our duty to you? How then do we displease you? Please weave a miracle to make it all right.’

*These words and thoughts imagined but did she talk to God?
My mother does. I do. I wonder did Rena believe in God or not?*

My mother does not. Neither do I.

*But in the way of many Jews who do not believe in God,
like Chaim Bermant quips,
we like to think that God believes in us.*⁴⁷

How can we know the unknowable?

*My mother’s anecdotes, concomitant with recorded Polish-Jewish life,⁴⁸
are of people who had a life; they are an aspect of the real.
I cannot, I will not ever know them.*

But oh, Mummy, how I do remember you.

Delight of Life: Melbourne, Summer 1955

I have just turned ten.

My parents work hard all week, rushing home so we can eat by six.

While she is cooking, my Mummy does some funny things. Like, if she spills some salt she gets upset, because apparently, that means a fight, so, she’ll sprinkle some sugar, just in case, while telling me with a laugh how it is nonsense to do so. She talks to herself all the time, making a spitting sound ‘peu peu’ each time she has expressed happiness or praised one of us, so as not to tempt the fates. When breaking eggs, she is delighted if there are double yolks. ‘Twins,’ she exclaims. But if there is a speck of blood in the yolk, she throws it out.

I ask, ‘Is the egg no good?’

'The egg is fertilised, it is the start of life and we don't eat that.' Seeing the look on my face, she adds with a laugh, 'But I am not superstitious.' It makes no sense, but I know from religious instruction classes, eating blood is forbidden, so that must be it.

The Village Belle in Acland Street, near the beach and Luna Park, is where my Mummy does her shopping. She gets the meat from Mr Redlich, the continental butcher. In the school holidays, I go to help.

Mr Redlich stands, wiping his solid hands on his big white apron. The red colouring of his face contrasts with his very black hair, and is further given a rakish look by his large gappy teeth which are revealed as he breaks into a big smile of welcome when we enter.

He exchanges pleasantries with my mother and as he selects cuts of meat for her, she asks, 'Is it good?'

He loses his smile and seems offended. 'Am I in the meat?' he replies, raising his hands in a gesture of unknowing.

Gathering her courage, for she does not like to complain, she says, 'Last week it was not so good.'

He considers this and, selecting another piece of brisket, says, 'I'm sure this will be good.'

She leaves, reassured, but still a little anxious – if the meat is tough, or not tasty, my father will not be pleased. As we walk, she chuckles, 'He is right; he is not in the meat. I will tell your Daddy. I am not in the meat, either.'

On Friday, Mummy does not go to the factory to work. She stays home to make a Sabbath dinner: chicken soup with noodles, boiled chicken, shpondra and carrots, boiled potatoes, green beans, lettuce and tomato salad with a lemon dressing, and apple compote.

The table in the kitchen is set with a white tablecloth. When all is ready at six o'clock, my mother lights the candles and says the Sabbath prayer.

My father cuts the golden challah, he gives each of us a piece, and I am allowed a small glass of Marsala wine.

Oh, I forgot the *kishke*!

This is a sort of sausage. Earlier I watched as my mother stuffed skin from the neck of the chicken with minced chicken fat, onions, salt and

white pepper. She sewed the ends up and put it in the soup to cook. Daddy loves it, and Mummy is so pleased watching him enjoy it, but *kishke* makes my tummy turn; I just can't eat it or any foods with strong fishy smells like sardines and herring. Mummy and Daddy like to say that with my fussiness and the way I glare – Daddy calls this my black-look – it is not possible I am their daughter; they must have brought the wrong baby home. Anyway, we all love chicken. Daddy has the first chicken leg; Janette and I take it in turns to have the second; Mummy laughs at us fighting about whose turn it is; she says the chicken should have three legs. Her favourite piece is the tail (I will learn that is called 'the parson's nose'). Dinner over, while we have a nice cup of tea, I think about how later tonight we will have our usual peanuts. We just love this. Every Friday Daddy brings home a whole lot of roasted unshelled peanuts wrapped in newspaper. After dinner, we will open the parcel and, sitting on the bare wooden floor of the lounge room – not on the bulky red upholstered arm chairs – we will crack open peanuts and eat until our tummies can take no more.

On Saturday afternoon, maybe he and I will go by tram to see a movie in the city – the theatres are huge and very fancy; especially grand is the theatre called 'The Forum' with statues down the sides and stars on the ceiling – I can already see us walking hand-in-hand down Collins Street chatting about what we have seen at the matinee.

Then it will be Sunday! Most Sundays start lazy. Mummy and Daddy like to sleep in on Sunday after playing cards or partying, sometimes dancing away the night until early hours of the morning – mambo, samba, tango.

Though we long to open the shut door to their room, neither my sister nor I would think of doing so.

I have a set of red building bricks that come with white windows and doorframes – the pieces click together with a snap; sometimes I build houses while I wait, or play with my Meccano set, pretending the hinged sections are cranes.

Time seems to stand still.

At last, they call 'Come in'. Sometimes we have to knock a quiet reminder – permission granted, Janette and I rush into the room; leaping in between them, we laugh and cuddle until Mummy gets up. Then we lie, one on either side of Daddy in the big bed. On the wall are

photos of the grandparents we never knew. Daddy gives us rides and plays tickling games until our sides hurt from laughing; we pummel him until he says 'Enough'.

We plead for more. He tickles and throws us around and tries to get out of bed; we hang onto his arms forcing him back; on it goes until he manages to escape.

Breakfast is scrambled eggs Polish style, and, while we eat, Daddy is busy on the phone making arrangements.

Every Sunday we go out. Sometimes we visit friends or relatives for afternoon-tea – there is always cake and strong black tea with lemon, sweetened with cubes of sugar.

Or we go to Studley Park in Kew, to watch people flying models, airplanes and kites, or we stroll around the Shrine, a memorial to fallen soldiers – it seems these people had a war too. Or we join the crowd at 'Music for the People' at the Botanic Gardens and maybe feed the ducks, or have a picnic, or go to Luna Park, or to the beach.

One thing is certain, whatever we do, we do it with as many of Mummy and Daddy's friends as can make it.

Sometimes we go for long drives to the country: Ocean Grove, Olinda, Yan Yean Reservoir, Healesville. We have picnic lunches of crusty rye bread and fresh crunchy Kaiser Rolls filled with good things: ham, sausage, sliced tomatoes and cucumbers. We bite into hard-boiled eggs, quench our thirst with soft drinks and hot tea out of thermos flasks and declare everything 'Delicious!' 'Fantastic!' Everyone agrees.

Daddy swings Janette on his shoulders. We set off to some distant scenic destination 'to walk it off', the grown-ups tell each other, all the while cracking jokes they find side-splitting and I don't get.

What do we look like, this happy crowd of picnickers? Most of the ladies have blonde hair, a bouffant style held in place with hairspray and hairpins. They have lightly tanned skin – the only make-up they wear is coral lipstick. Mummy – with her shoulder-length brown hair, rosy cheeks, smooth skin, always a smile or laugh, never a frown or cross word – to me she is the most beautiful.

The men are well-groomed: brilliantine in their hair, faces close shaven. Mr Rotstein, my godfather, wears a colourful cravat; like my Daddy, he has a trim black moustache. The style of dress is casual: open-collared

shirts, shorts or slacks and flat shoes, and cardigans, in case of a change in the weather.

The grown-ups flirt with each other. They have *sympatias* which my mother explains means special, but platonic, friend. Mummy and I like to tease Daddy that his favourite *sympatia* is Mrs Enker; I know Mummy loves Mrs Enker too, so it is all okay. It is clear that several men would like to be Mummy's *sympatia*, but she just laughs and keeps an eye on my Daddy.

Yes, it is perfect – well, nearly. Even though we have all kissed each other on both cheeks to say 'hello' and will do the same when we say 'goodbye', there are always one or two men who are not satisfied with just talking or hand kissing; they like to try for a bit of a cuddle and maybe a kiss on the lips. The women are good at getting free with a laugh or a friendly slap.

I deflect unwelcome hugs by running off to play with the other children, which is a pity, as I do like to hang out with the grown-ups.

Going home, pleasantly exhausted, watching the scrolling scenery, my heart full at evening glory, I vow never to forget the sky, fluffy pink clouds, rolling green hills, neat patchwork fields, trees and windbreaks of dark green pines, animals grazing peacefully, all aglow in the golden light.

My sister, four years old and in kindergarten, gazes out of the window. Spying a flock of lambs, she exclaims in a piping voice, '*Kaczkele, kaczkele*' – duckling, duckling – we correct her gently with 'No, *shepsele, shepsele*' – lamb, lamb.

She gazes at us, nods, repeats, '*Kaczkele, kaczkele*'.

We laugh and laugh. Everything is good with our world.

This Sunday, maybe we will go for a drive in our Holden. This is our second one; Daddy loves everything Australian – especially Holdens and Peters ice cream which we know is the Health Food of a Nation. We eat lots of ice cream ...

Maybe we'll picnic at Maroondah Dam again. And as we walk we'll stomp our feet and we'll be singing 'The Happy Wanderer' – 'Valderi, Valdera ...', or mimicking Frank Ifield we'll yodel, 'When I'm calling you oo oo ...' and then we'll break into 'How much is that doggy in

the window? The one with the waggley tail.' We'll finish off with my favourite – the Bella Bella song: '*Bei mir bist du scheyn*'⁴⁹ which I know means 'to me you are beautiful'.

Daddy interrupts my thoughts with an announcement: our destination for the coming holidays for two weeks, while 1955 will turn into 1956, is decided. With many of our friends, we will go to a place called Lakes Entrance.

Janette claps her hands,
Daddy and I beam at each other,
Mummy laughs with us.

All of a sudden, Mummy is quiet. Her eyes mist.

She says, as if to herself,

*'Ah, what do you know?
Nothing, nothing, can compare, to a holiday in Świder.'*

CHAPTER 3: THE LAST SUMMER

Warsaw: 1939

*I loved holidays,
sledding down icy slopes of the mountains of Krynica;
or basking in sunshine then cooling off in Lake Sniardwy.
But nothing compared to a holiday in Świder.
Ah, Świder. That was my favourite place.'*

The Warsaw spring of 1939 turns to summer. Long days and hazy heat herald the holiday season. Having discussed it among themselves, Rena and Pinkus tell their girls of A.H.'s takeovers, the year before, of the Sudetenland and Austria, and the annexation of Slovakia in March 1939.

After all it was in the newspapers.⁵⁰

NAZIS ANNEX CZECHO-SLOVAKIA
Anglo-French Attitude 'Calm But Not Complacent'.

But not a whisper to the girls of Nazi agreements with Romania and Hungary, the pact with Italy, or the disputed territories changing hands as countries, including Poland, sign and break agreements, while grabbing what they can. Some friends have sold up, fled to South America. Overreaction surely. What is the point of frightening their girls by dwelling on news of the marching of jackboots through neighbouring countries? No need to lie; the joint Franco-British declaration of support for Poland and the new nonaggression pact

between Germany and the Soviets indicate a stalemate; war will have little impact on them. It will be unpleasant but short. The best thing is to hold tight. There is no need to spoil the holidays.

So, as many times before, the family sets off for their country cabin, one of a group of eight, nestling in the forests of Świder, Otwock, 30 kilometres south-east of Warsaw. This property – on acreage with tennis courts and orchards, named *Begeha*, at 3 Zaciszna⁵¹ – is further evidence to the girls of their father's business acumen; consequent prosperity accepted as a reward for good conduct, hard work, and superior intelligence.

As the train passes quaint villages and folk – any wretchedness blurred in the view bucolic – anticipation grows.

At last the township of Świder! Laughing in excitement, the family transfers to two horse-drawn buggies. Waving to each other, they drink in the summer smells, their eyes feasting on fields of bright wildflower-dotted grasses and deep green pine and beech forests, beyond which the Vistula River continues on to Warsaw.

Once at their delightful cabin, a miniature replica of grander places inhabited by the really rich, they settle in; the young people, freed at last from the constraints of the city, fill the air with joyous noise. The shrieks of laughter continue to bring smiles to the faces of the adults all through the day: while they laze over breakfast, are intent on card games as players or just *kibitzing* – talking, commenting, advising – and continue while they enjoy their evening strolls in the balmy last hours of daylight. The exhilarated youngsters, shaking their heads at their sedate parents, run and play while declaring, in English, that everything is 'too too marvellous'.

Some days, while they play volleyball on courts in the cleared area under large trees, Basia is aware of the caretaker Marchin's handsome blond grandson – he makes a show of not noticing her while placing himself in her line of vision. All her senses are aware of him; any sign of recognition or passing greeting is unthinkable. As marriage is inconceivable, a boy like him can only be interested in one thing from a girl like her.

*Did she ever, on finding her thoughts turning to him yet again,
arguing with herself about the impossibility of connection,
go beyond the status aspect, and fear of him as 'the other'
to consider the issue of her god and his?
I asked her. 'No', she said,
'A nice Jewish girl simply did not mix with or marry a gentile. Full stop.'
But as she repeatedly told me of intractable religious issues,
and to convey something of the troubling divide,
I imagine she did.*

Her God is one: Eloheinu.⁵²

She has been taught that her God, the stern jealous creator of everything and maker of all the rules, had, according to the tradition, made the Jews responsible for bearing witness to his moral law on earth.⁵³ In effect, God's promise to the Jews – increase in a milk-and-honey land – was given in exchange for obedience.

The blond boy's God is one yet simultaneously three: The Father, The Son, The Holy Ghost. Thus many people, at the time, invoked one as the antithesis of the other.⁵⁴

Moreover, antisemitic Poles' hatred of Jews stemmed from church teachings that the Jews had killed the Christians' Christ and from their superstitious belief that Jews used the blood of Christian babies in religious rituals in the baking of *matzos*.

*How could anyone believe such abhorrent libel? Many did.*⁵⁵

And they called this son-of-God Christ and Messiah. But the Jewish Messiah was yet to come. Certainly, representations of this Christ and of others in the churches were graven images, forbidden by the Second Commandment.⁵⁶

Perhaps, like cousin Sara liked to say, God was just an idea of man to ease the pain of life and the pain of death. Understandably, poor Jews would joke: 'We are the chosen people – chosen to suffer' or 'Choose someone else.'

Perhaps, as Uncle Mayer often said, though never directly to her (being highly religious he neither would nor could acknowledge the

presence of a female) God *was* there in the dirt and misery giving a radiance, to all who believed, through the recurring joy of the Sabbath and the holidays.

But why should the poor be suffering while she is happy and carefree and life is wonderful.

Casting away any such concerns, her thoughts return to Świder. One day part of it will belong to her; she will do her utmost to emulate her mother, she will keep her traditions while also obeying those of her country, and watch over her children, just as Rena is keeping an eye on her, in this her favourite place. Marchin's grandson belongs to a life very different from hers; he has no part in her future.

*Yet I remember a time, in 1956,
when I knew my mother to be open-minded and
when all she wanted was to belong.*

I am eleven; it is near the end of the school year. When my parents come to meet my teacher, he tells them that, as I am such a good student, if I study hard, I could get to go to high school, the best being MacRobertson Girls' High School.

My father's eyes go round and pop in the way they do when he is impressed. In his broken English he asks,

'What does it cost, this high school? It must be a lot of money!'

My teacher replies: 'If Sara's results are good enough she might get a scholarship and even go on to university.'

With this piece of news my parents smile and beam at me.

Now I know what I want.

I will work hard to make my parents proud.

At last, school is over, no more primary school.

Next year I will wear a uniform and go to Toorak Central School!

Christmas Day, 1956, the sound of singing sends Mummy and me running to open the window that faces onto the street. Outside in the morning grey, a small group of people, wearing black uniforms and hats

with maroon trims, sing Christmas songs in joyful harmony: 'Away in a Manger', 'Jingle Bells', 'The Twelve Days of Christmas'.

'Lovely,' we sigh. They come to the door asking for money; we find they are Salvation Army officers who have got up before dawn to spread cheer and collect money for the poor.

Mummy empties out all the change in her purse.

Later she explains to me we should always help people less fortunate than ourselves regardless of colour or religion, and, although Christmas is not our holiday, still we are Australians and, as Australians are mostly Christian, it is all right to enjoy Christmas Day.

She smiles at me, adding: 'When in Rome do as the Romans do.'

I laugh at the way she looks so pleased with herself.

The saying has a ring to it and reminds me of what my Grade Five teacher, Mr Borrack, wrote it into my autograph book last year:

'Whatever you do do do, do do do it well.'

*Mr Borrack was an inspirational teacher;
my mother's inspirational teacher was her Latin teacher.
I visualise a day of warmth; into it go things she told me.
A day just before, with the onset of autumn,
the angel of history⁵⁷ blew this nice world away.*

CHAPTER 4: BASIA ON THE THRESHOLD

The late summer of 1939 at Świder speeds past Basia in a delicious haze. Soon she will be back at school. The hot sun has warmed and browned her. Lazing on a grassy knoll, rolling over into a shady patch and gazing at the sparkling specks of sunlight filtered through moving leaves, she hums a resounding Carmen – her favourite opera – how heavenly. Drowsy, she hears the Geography teacher's voice thrumming into her consciousness like the drone of a fat summer fly. Basia's thoughts go to far-off countries, to the relatives in Colombia.

She loves Geography – it is her favourite subject. However, the Geography teacher is not like the Latin teacher! The Latin teacher is divine. Shivering with anticipation, or is it a foretaste of autumn, Basia lifts her eyes from the book she's reading, takes in the breeze rustling the leaves above and smiles. She pictures her favourite professor, citing her favourite quote:

Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis.

*The times (all things) change, and we change with them.*⁵⁸

An image of the principal of her previous *gimnazjum*, Stefania Schweiger, intrudes, exhorting her to idealism and altruism. Well, despite the carrying on with 'Thou should's, she liked that school called *Yehudia*. But her mother thought Basia was becoming too religious so she moved her to a more liberal school – Landerowa⁵⁹ – which is not too bad. Her best subjects are sewing and handwork but mathematics is impossible – thank goodness for darling Miss Smarty, her sister Celina. When she recently told her father she'd love to be a dressmaker, Pinkus had derided such an occupation as unsuitable, so what on earth was she going to be?

Of late, in her imaginings of a future, her longing is to be a wife, a mother. For that, she needs a husband; her parents will want to make a match. Will she learn to love him? What if she finds she cannot? She shudders at the thought. She wants to love and to be a woman in love. Ah, love: *głupia miłość*. Stupid love; that's what her mother would say.

But love and sacrifice, for husband and children, is what she craves; devotion and duty like *O-Lan*⁶⁰ in her favourite book *The Good Earth*, which she has read – translated into Polish of course. Imagine having to twist your tongue around those strange English sounds, particularly that *th* one. Her favourite actors, Robert Taylor and Barbara Stanwyck, make the *the* sound sooo refined; her own attempts are ludicrous. She loves Barbara Stanwyck. Especially in *Stella Dallas*, about a woman who sacrifices everything for her daughter. Will she one day have a daughter to love so much? And how different are her sisters' ambitions to hers ...

Zosia, with many to choose from, is pragmatic in her declaration that though of course she would love him, her husband will be someone who could give her a good life. She has wanted to leave Poland and go to America with a girlfriend, but Rena and Pinkus have vetoed that, saying, 'What will people think? Young women all on their own.' Now it is clear she is interested in Adam who comes from a very fine family indeed.

For Celinka a good life means learning; perhaps her man will be a scholar. They laugh at Basia for her romantic notions. But they are both as one with Basia in their confusion over their father's disrespect for things, which, for their other relatives, are sacrosanct. Like the eating of ham. Forbidden in all its forms, ingestion of pork conjures the image of invoking God's wrath. And now Pinkus, with his inclination to modern ways, has this year been caught eating ham here in Świder. Of course, her father can do as he wishes. However, if it is such a sin, why was there no sign from God of his displeasure?

Searching her memories for evidence of God's indifference, she recalls the occasion when Marshall Joseph Piłsudski, president of the *Sanacja* regime, hero of Polish independence, had died in May 1935 when she was eleven; she had knelt and prayed for him. A Jew

kneeling! That was for pagans and Christians. Mosaic Law forbade kneeling. So how was it that she had not been punished? Perhaps she had, after all she dare tell no one and the memory of those moments on her knees come back to haunt her and trouble her conscience.

Despite her goodie-goodie exterior, Basia has a few new sins to report. This coming October, just weeks away, when she will fast as usual on *Yom Kippur* and, in the synagogue, confess and atone for her sins, there will be more than usual to declare. For one thing, her thoughts are of late out of her control and the curse *cholera psia krew* has escaped her lips just like the bad blood of cholera escapes its victims, contaminating those around – so, as such language is vile, she has broken a commandment. Worse still, is that kiss she gave away last week here in Świder. Not just a kiss! He, the son of her parents' friends, wanted more! She'd had to use all her strength to get away.

Her resolve crystallises into a resolution: 'I will wait, keeping myself for the man I will love. He will be handsome! To him I will give all. And, God willing, I will have his children and devote myself to him and to them.'

During these days of that last summer of 1939, having just turned sixteen on August 22, Basia has the radiance of a healthy farm girl. Her smooth skin and rosy cheeks bring compliments from young and old. Her dark brown hair, curling and long, is glamorous – indeed a friend of the family has called her 'The poor man's Rita Hayworth'. Another even teasingly called her Bathsheba.

A loud laugh, untempered by her mother's gentle exhortations to tone it down, breaks out at the slightest encouragement. Nor do admonishments, 'Do not talk with your hands', succeed in stilling their butterfly motion.

Her white teeth tear into the hard apples she loves, and her full figure and slender legs complete the picture of promise of the woman-to-be who, though confused by the many taboos, tries to live by Hillel's axiom:

*'What is offensive to you, do not do to others.'*⁶¹

No longer a child, not yet a woman;
Basia stands poised in the troubled present:
wanting to stay in her happy past, longing for her unknown future.
Unaware that on 23 August, the day after her birthday,
headlines had broadcast an event that caught the world off guard.

Nazi-Soviet Pact Stuns World
Danzig Teeming With Activity.
Germany expects Peace. Expects Britain to withdraw guarantee to Poland.
German army ready to move.⁶²



Anticipating a good life,
different yet the same as
what she has known,
she has no inkling
that this precious time has ended,
she will have no time of 'normal' youth,
and all her adult life
she will yearn for this time.

This time when the world was nice.

*This photo was taken in 1937.
From left, back row: Basia's
cousin Sara Czosnek; Basia's
mother Rena; Basia's sister
Zosia, eighteen years old; a
cousin, possibly Zvi Najer.
Front row: Basia at fourteen;
a cousin Renia Czosnek; Basia's
sister Celina, ten years old; a
cousin, Gucia Birenbaum.*



PART THREE

NAMES AND EYES OF THE FATHER

DO NOT TAKE THE NAME IN VAIN

Heniek's Longing: To Be a Free Man

Here he is, outside Gestapo headquarters in Warsaw.
My father Heniek, blinking in the daylight,
willing his heart to still.
A new name: Czesław. Papers: fingerprinted, stamped, authorised.

He, with dark hair and crisp moustache – just twenty years old –
looked them right in the eye; they'd seen only another Pole.
With these documents, he can walk around
as if a free man – even work. This possibility entices.

Meanwhile Basia waits for him in hiding.
Her papers – giving her the name Jadwiga – rejected twice.
She, with non-Aryan looks, dares not present.
He knows she will be counting the seconds until his return.
Love motivates him: she must survive with him.
By tram, he heads back.

*Soon he would go with her into the bunker.
To the dark place to lie with her – his wife.
What if he had known it was to be for eighteen months?
Oh, my Papa, to me you were so wonderful.*

*Immeasurable the delight of your arrivals;
we waited for your returns.
You always came: on time, often with gifts or treats,
always exuding adventure, glamour, and a hint of mystery.
So very handsome, especially in those first memories in 1949.*



Evening grey. Grey water. Grey sky. WAIT! Brilliant sunshine. A large square deep pool, a kitten. My daddy holding a kitten. I am three. Daddy is keeping an eye on me in the pool, beaming with his crooked smile. There is a man with a pitchfork – we are on a ship. Evening grey. We are on a new shore.

Light! A white house on a grassy hill. There are new puppies under the house; with a freckle-faced girl, small like me, I crawl under the boards to see them. The puppies are tiny, soft, white and tan.

I am with other children in a long bright clean room. We are all sick with the mumps. Our beds are all in a neat row. Kind strict ladies bustle about, reminding us to behave ourselves. There are many rules to remember and the milk boils over. The burnt milk smell fills the room.

Sunday. Visitors' Day. Daddy is here! He sits on a chair next to my bed. He is very handsome with his crooked smile. He shows me a letter from my mother far away in a country called Israel. He speaks to me in French.

In my best English, I tell him I will soon be four – I am an Australian now, English is my language. No more French. No more Yiddish.

His pride in me peeps out of his eyes; he says he'll be back in two weeks, and as he leaves, he calls me his *ketsele* – his kitten.



I am nearly eight, tall and boyish. My father does not call me *ketsele* anymore. He calls me 'stick'. Though Mummy calls me 'the-clever-one', I am awkward, clumsy, tongue-tied.

My sister, Janette Pauline, named for grandfathers Jacob and Pinkus, two years old, is so lovely, we dub her, 'The Beautiful One'. When we walk her in the pram, people stop to admire.

A recent photo of her decorates the lounge room: hair black with a touch of wave, hands chubby, smile sweet, eyes hazel and dreamy.

There is also a picture of me at three; wearing a white fur coat, I have a mass of jet-black curls and a shy smile.

On Rosh Hashanah, having eaten our New Year feast in the dining room, not in the kitchen like on ordinary days, with the table cleared, picking at bits of oranges and apples, we are all relaxed and laughing.

I ask: 'Where is a picture of me as a baby?'

Mummy and Daddy glance at each other.

Flushed from the festive meal and wine, Daddy says,
'Basia, we are going to look at photos.'

From the credenza, he takes out a used school case and clears a space.
He places the case on the white cloth and sits again.

For an endless moment, he hesitates.

At last, flipping the catch, he opens the case.

He pauses, then tips the contents onto the table.

Photos – black and white, and sepia – spill out making a small pile.

Picking up a photo of a group of people, he says:

'This is my mother, my father, my sisters. This is me.'

There are also photos of my mother's parents, and one of my mother with a group of people – Mummy points out her two sisters:
the serious younger clever one – 'You, take after her,' she says.

'And the older one?'

'Just like Dorothy Lamour, oh, how the men chased after her!'

And here is a baby photo of me.

Lying on my tummy, my head held like a turtle, my face turned to the camera's flash, naked, I am skinny with a huge belly.

Ah, this is a nice one taken a while ago with Janette.

And another with my Mummy and Daddy.

All of us look handsome. Mummy has tears in her eyes.

Daddy says, 'Enough for today.'

He has a strange look in his hazel eyes.

My head teems with questions that do not make it to my lips.



Here is the photo of me and my baby sister Janette.



*It was three years later – autumn 1956 –
that I became aware of my family
not fitting in with the Australian family.
A long table covered in a white cloth brings it back.*

The retelling of the Exodus from Egypt told.
The Passover feast eaten; four glasses of wine drunk.
The first to toast life in thanks to God for keeping us alive.
The second to toast freedom. The third glass to redemption.
The fourth glass to thank God for taking us as His.
And a fifth special cup remains undrunk for the prophet Elijah.
My first real Passover – intoned in Hebrew, incomprehensible;
happy to be part of it, if only at the edge.

My mother sits at the *Pesach* table, her cheeks rose-red from the wine,
her smile fixed, her eyes glistening; while the others sing – she makes
not a sound. This she will explain to me later, saying,
'They have not been there when I watched my father
conduct the service; they cannot know and I cannot tell them.'

PART THREE: NAMES AND EYES OF THE FATHER

And my father, so refined, has a stiffness about him. An observer not a partaker; he does not sing, neither do I. Nor does he indicate in any way that I should join in. She, he and I, apart together.

*Each year, at the telling of the Exodus story,
disturbing deposits adhered:
the exclusion of the son who does not believe, the smiting of enemies,
the bringing down of plagues, the killing of the first-born.
To me the telling was akin to boxes like Pandora's,
replete with evils that beget trials;
God's love was offered only if one conformed.*

*In a search for insight,
I had cause to look up The Third Commandment.
Understanding comes in a flash:
(un)welcome, troubling, elating, surprising. My perception of
Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain'
had been the customary one that prohibits swearing,
in particular, swearing that includes 'God' and/or 'Jesus Christ'.
But this search revealed: 'not take the name in vain'
means not swear falsely by the name of God.*

Thus: not use the name of God to make a dishonest oath;
not affirm as true something known to be false;
not affirm false something known to be true;
not affirm the truth of something obvious (due to its triviality);
not promise some act known to be impossible
or outside one's abilities.⁶³

*The Commandments Ten had seemed focused on God's ego,
but the instruction to decent behaviour
concomitant with justice
was there all the time.
Gratitude after all for the wisdom of the giants that have gone before.
And the most honest and honourable person I ever knew – my father –
wanting to conceal, protect, forget –
he held back, as, in 1996, I persisted in asking the questions.*

Tales of my father's birth, propitious names, various activities,
and serendipitous near misses, are by now family lore
but details of his family elude.

Since I began, I've asked questions that made my pulse race.

Ordinary words caused this terror. 'Daddy what was your home like ...'

He interrupts in an impatient tone, 'What do you want to know this for?'

He clams up. I drop it. I try again. 'What was your mother like?'

No answer. He is somewhere else. I change tack.

Of his father, I tease out a description of sorts.

Of the sisters, he gives me their names.

Of his mother, he eventually tells me she was a housewife ...

As I persist, there comes a night when he softens.

'Daddy, was there music?'

'Yes.'

'Servants?'

'Yes.'

'Kosher?'

'And how!' Mummy interjects.

And then I ask,

'Daddy, what did you like best when you were a boy at home?'

Silence.

'Daddy, what do you miss most?'

His eyes focus on me;
heart-breaking absence in that look.
Daddy?

His answer breaks my heart.

All of it. The whole thing.

PART FOUR

THE WHOLE THING

Warsaw 1922–39

REMEMBER THE SABBATH

Celia Heller wrote of the Jewish Jews (Orthodox-traditionalists):

Individual life ... was ... as a gently flowing stream ... In childhood ... freedom from anxiety; in maturity, the joys of building a household; in old age ... respect ...

*One had to submit to one's father, but every father was also a son ...*⁶⁴

Kant wrote in 1784 of the surge that was to sweep through Europe:

*Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. Sapere aude! [Dare to know!] Have courage to use your own reason! – that is the motto of enlightenment.*⁶⁵

And Terence⁶⁶ in 161BC wrote:

Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto – I am a human being: I regard nothing of human concern as foreign to my interests.

*In a time when some sought a moral order without religion,
and known ways of living were being challenged,
other willed their way to power without morality.*

CHAPTER 5: WHERE GOOD CAN FLOURISH

Chaim (Heniek) Heber is born in Warsaw on 22 October 1922. His mother Sara, from the large far-flung Degenszajn family, was born in a small town where survival meant grasping any opportunity. His father, Jacob Heber, the son of Menachem Mendel – meaning comforter – named in honour of Abraham’s grandson, had come from the town of Kalisz, and before that from Germany. A jewellery wholesaler from a line of moderate, devout men, Jacob had secured a niche in the trading of precious stones and created a serene environment to insulate his children from the world; a splintered mad world groaning under medieval conditions while aspiring to be a force in the surrounding modernity.

Heniek’s birth is at a time of optimism for Jews in newly independent Poland, where, after a hundred years of occupation by its neighbours – Russia, Germany, and Austria – Poland’s minorities look forward to a their place as citizens in the fledgling democracy.

But pogroms in the countryside and the boycott of Jewish shops are an ongoing reality, as is consideration of the Jews as inferior foreigners.

Heniek’s *bris*, the circumcision ceremony marking Abraham’s covenant with God, is a solemn, memorable and joyful occasion attended by all the rabbis and relatives. His nine-year-old cousin Pesakh (who would soon go to a life in Australia) travels from the village of Skierniewice, bringing geese as his family’s contribution. Carried by his young cousin Mania (my ‘Auntie’ Mania), on the special *bris*-cushion, as the last hope for a surviving male, Heniek is given the name Chaim Alter; Chaim (pronounced ‘hime’ as in time),

that he would live; Alter, that he would get old. The rabbis bless him according to tradition: 'May he be raised for the Torah, the wedding ... the good deed.' They decree that he neither wear new clothes nor his hair be cut for a year to seal the blessing of his name. *Hassidim* in the gathering dance to express their joy; all around him, happiness flows. The only boy and youngest child, he is pampered by a congregation of females: adoring mother, five sisters, from youngest to oldest: Inka (Regina), Dorka (Dorothy), Marisa also known as Mania (Mary), Franka (Frances), Fella (Felicity), and many friends and relatives – happy times. Sara and Jacob, fearful their precious son will sicken and die as had his five brothers, watch his every move, panicking if he so much as gives a cough. Though small and weak as a baby, during his first six years, in the company of these many women and doting father, nurtured by devotion, love, and attention to duty, he grows strong. Secure and protected, he knows nothing of the tensions that have driven his cousin Mania's family to sell up, buy land unseen off a map, and travel with illegal documents to a dangerous life in Palestine, where some settlers enjoy fruits, vegetables, flowers, while others starve.

In this sheltered atmosphere, an assortment of languages abound; the parents speak Yiddish between themselves and a mix of Yiddish and Polish with their children, Hebrew for synagogue, *Shabbat* and religious holidays, and German and Russian for visitors. The sisters also bring French into the home: *chérie*, *l'amour*, *la mer*, and interlace the whole with English expressions: 'tripe', 'cool man', 'we had a ball'. Operas and arias fill the air as one or another of the girls play on the piano or listen to the gramophone. Including young Chaim in their play, they laugh as he conducts while they sing along.

The many family members are accommodated in a spacious three-bedroom apartment, with lounge room and separate dining room, at 17 Graniczna Street in a pleasant, not particularly Jewish part of Warsaw, just near the magnificent Saxon Garden and Palace, *Ogród Saski*, on Marszałkowska Street. Running a household of this size, seeing everything is 'fit' in accordance with dietary law, even with the help of several Polish and Jewish servants, both live-in and part-

time, is a major production requiring constant attention; somehow, everyone's needs are met. By the time Chaim is five, in 1927, conscious of his only-son status, nothing pleases him more than the smiles and fond looks cast his way from that most beloved of faces – his mother, Sara – his *Mamunia*.

Longing: of Sara, for Sara

Tell me about your mother, please, Daddy.

He stares past me, eyes blank.

In soft moments, he tells snippets of the form of those days:
relatives come to stay, servants to manage. But of his mother, nothing.
One photo is all I have, to give substance to and sustenance for
the longing of Sara for Sara.



Taken or sent, from Europe to Australia,
before 1939. Sister to sister. An image,
I give thanks for this precious scrap.

What can I tell you of her? Not much.

But I speak to her:

I twirl my hair as they say you did.

I see you in my father, and in his cousins;
you reside in me.

Just when was this photo taken?

Perhaps in 1932 when you were 45?

On this night in 2009, as I gaze at you I see
a new light in your eyes; your face now holds a smile just for me.

Any moment you might give me a fond wink, a rich throaty laugh,
a high chuckle. Were you serious? Did you enjoy a joke?

Oh, though all I have is this Mona Lisa mystery, I can tell them
I carry your name and I would have called you *Bubbe*.

Pronounce it Bubba: *bubb*– as in bull, *a* as in almond. *Bubba*.

Grandmother.

And you would have just loved me to bits.

CHAPTER 6: THE FUTURE BECKONS

In Warsaw, it is 1928 and Sara is surely content; healthy family, duty done, relatives accommodated. Luckily, with a bit of doubling up and the use of folding beds, the apartment can take in so many. Sara's sister Faygalleh, who is still camping with her husband David and several of her children in the Heber household lounge room after returning three years prior from toil in Palestine, shows Sara the letters that come from her daughter Mania in Australia. Mania also writes to Sara's eldest daughter Fella and always asks how Chaim is doing. This voice, calling like a siren, is irksome; an interruption to the flow of a known, ordered way of life.

*From Mania herself, the details are history,⁶⁷
and thereby inspired, I imagine my grandmother Sara's thoughts
about her adventurous niece.*

'These letters from Mania drip with hardships: she lives in poverty – no gas, no proper bed, just a bunk made out of boards; working as a finisher in a factory. And they also entice: she says there is a small Jewish community, even a beautiful synagogue. Surely Faygalleh and David exaggerate about the tensions here. So, a Polack attacked Mania in the street. She should have known better than to be heard speaking Hebrew in a public place. But is she putting ideas into my Fella's head? What if my eldest darling took it into her head to leave – what could you do?'

So Sara muses on this far-off Australia calling her sister to its shore. It is all very well for Faygalleh to go – David, determined to leave Poland, had sent Mania and some of her brothers to Australia as an advance party. But Sara loves her life here. No! She would not like

it at the other end of the world. Heat. Flies. Oh, this talk against the Poles, some people want to hurry things; they worry with little ground, and make things worse rather than better. It will work out.

Did she chastise herself with a reprimand?

‘What has got into you today?’ Isn’t everything is as it should be! What a husband! Handsome, of slim build, medium stature, distinguished with a gentle sense of humour; devoted to his vast family; time and energy for duty to God, for extended family – his and hers.

Surely her whole being sings when his eyes, shining with intelligence, turn to look at her in appreciation when he thinks she is not looking. She loves his voice. When he speaks of his reverence for knowledge and learning, she observes Chaim drinking in his words. In this ambience of the miracle of filial respect and adoration, her gratitude flows.

‘Thanks to my husband I was able to help my poor younger brother Zev and my sister Faygalleh. We were small-town-people: mother Frimit died at such a young age from that awful cholera; father Pesakh followed seven days later. I cannot think of the word *cholera* without shuddering. Relatives were kind; life was so hard one of my cousins went, with the rabbi who came to gather would-be brides, to Palestine, still ruled by Turks, and married a stranger – a Sephardi – a Jew from the Middle East (probably Egypt) by the name of Azulouis.’⁶⁸

‘What luck for a poor one such as me to be matched to Jacob, an educated Levi.’⁶⁹ Moreover, every day I give thanks that he should have such *nakhes*, such joy, from our Chaim after so many disappointments. Ah, my grandchild, Sara, my namesake. If only you could see your grandfather at the head of the table. What a comfort to hear him speak the words of wisdom in the Torah. Not that he was fanatical. He would keep his head covered at the table, never eat *trayf*, no forbidden food, never take transport on the Sabbath; however, he did not expect me or our daughters to be pious. I was not obliged to cover my head with a *sheitel*, that unbecoming, uncomfortable wig; a scarf was sufficient, nor did I attend the *mikva* – the ritual bathhouse.

We kept the Sabbath, as is prescribed by the Fourth Commandment,⁷⁰ but I was not required to refrain from normal basic duties as in some households. Life was full of unexpected twists and turns; one never knew whether to laugh or cry, but indeed mine was a blessed life of duty and delight. And not that it is important ... but he was so handsome.'

Longing: for Jacob (and for Branko)



'Such a handsome man.' Verified in one photo. Copied from those treasures, sent by Sara to her sister Faygalleh in Australia before the war.

Waiting here in Australian for Heniek, this photo of my grandfather Jacob, taken around 1930 when he was 45.

Many girls seek a man like their father. I fell in love with one who to me from the first moment my eyes did see him was beautiful and familiar.

A déjà vu yearning encapsulated.

People would say of him: 'Such a handsome man.'

Banal the words we use to convey beauty without and within.

A drawing of my gentile husband, Branko,⁷¹ pencilled by me in 1965, is to the left of where I am typing in 2009.

With other images of the deceased,
it is under the photo of Jacob.

To my eye the likeness is striking. Each
has high forehead,
well-shaped eyebrows, good nose;
Jacob's aquiline, Branko's turned up.
Both have hair fine and straight,.
Enquiring tilt to the head.
Jacobs's dark eyes thoughtful;
colour unknown. Possibly hazel.
Branko's eyes were green pools of pain.



I defied all opposition to marry this man whom I loved entirely.

I would tease him that he looked like my grandfather.

Handsome. Intelligent. And profoundly sad.

Hidden: the inner torment of betrayal by one's own body.

And both dead in their 58th year.



Jacob, in contemplating his lot, gives thanks for his Sara. He appreciates both her down-to-earthness and restraint; but there is more. On occasion, a certain exotic gipsy style about her slips out – a shawl flung just so, a comb to hold back her thick straight hair – bringing a fleeting glimpse of a legacy of wondrous women through thousands of years. Being a devoted husband to her is no hardship. Moreover, what strength of character she has shown in defying the exhausting illness – the family plague of diabetes – to bear yet another child in their Quest For A Son. And the way she manages the house and servants – a few firm words in a barely raised voice keep everything done to his liking.

Perfect! His life is perfect. He has no difficulty in fulfilling his obligations to God, family and community. He enjoys respect as learned and liberal at the synagogue, has standing among his colleagues at the Jewellers' Club, loves his work with precious metals and stones. His office, located in his bedroom – so convenient – has all he needs to conduct his business contained in two tall cabinets and a roll-top desk; after all, diamonds are so small. Chaim loves getting into the room to peek at the boxes with the sparkling jewels laid out in their beds of soft dark pergamon velvet; perhaps he should scold the boy more. Ah well, it is such a pleasure to show the intricate watch workings, explain the values of precious stones, and see Chaim's fascination.

Yes, he is King in his home: a raised eyebrow, a cool look of displeasure is enough to convey the need for restraint or immediate action. If only it could just stay like this. Observing his grown daughters move from the traditional ways towards Polish mores and values is a concern; now Yiddish is no longer good enough for them,

There is excitement and preparation as Chaim, now mostly called Heniek, is bar mitzvahed on his thirteenth birthday. This entry to manhood, further celebrated by a gathering in his parents' home of the many relatives and friends, means that at last he is a man, responsible for his own actions. Two of his sisters, already married, bring with them their husbands; these men, expounding ideas with conviction, expand Heniek's world; the impossible seems logical, achievable, even commonplace.

Family gatherings include cousins and friends with many views represented. Words flow to express enjoyment or despair at the paradoxes of life. Discussions range over diverse topics. Sometimes voices speak out of belief, other times to provoke the intellect. By unspoken agreement, rousing comments on the political situation, the kind that might invite heated debate and tempt intellectual retaliation, such words remain unvoiced in Jacob's presence.

*Oh such frustration at holding one's tongue – then and now.
If they had been able to talk things over
would it have made any difference?*

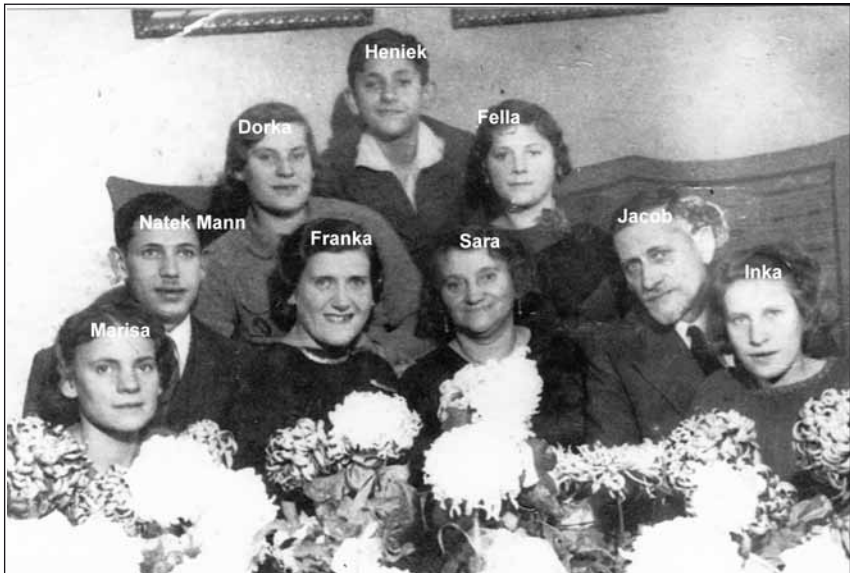


Photo possibly Heniek's bar mitzvah, 22 October 1935.

Sara, increasingly tired and longing for another rest cure, contemplates yet another letter from her sister. It is 1936 and Faygalleh writes that Australia is the land of opportunity, husband David is busy manufacturing milk separators and moulds for radios, the whole family is doing well, and living in a magnificent two-storey house in a suburb called Carlton. Sara, trying to picture life under an unremitting hot sun, wonders why her sister makes no mention of kangaroos hopping down the street.

She sighs. What is she to do with everyone running away all over the place? Now Fella, in a bit of a funk, wants to go to see Mania in the sunny far-off land. Well, that takes a lot of money, not to mention papers and permits. If Fella goes, will she ever see her eldest daughter again? Will the others want to follow? There's no way Jacob would ask favours from his brother-in-law to get permits for all of them. And he would not consider going anywhere anyway, especially not with his dreadful arthritis which is getting worse, making it so hard for him to walk unaided. It seems he'll soon need to resort to a wheelchair.

And the diabetes that runs in her side of the family is bringing her low again. No, they're not well enough to relocate, so please God the children should stay here too. Perhaps she'll go to the spas at Marienbad. It has done her good before. But this health resort in Czechoslovakia is far away, the travel is tiring, the atmosphere at the spa is changed. Last time there had been sideways glances at her from a group of Germans and she heard *die Jüdin* – female Jew – in so derogatory a tone, accompanied by a look so threatening, that fear entered and stuck in the pit of her stomach. No, she'll not go, she'll stay home and manage.

*This fear thing, an intrinsic consequence of being a Jew, when did I first encounter it? Ah, yes, two years before we went to Brighton; I was eleven, in the summer of early 1957, when I first heard my father say: **Never Again.***

Sundays we go to the beach at Seaford and stay the whole day. Many of my parents' friends are here. One of the men has taken to my mother. He flirts with her; one Sunday he makes a bold grab at her bosom as we walk along the dirt path to the beach. Mummy moves

away, takes my hand and runs ahead. I am shocked. She shushes me, tells me to forget it. It bothers me, this awful behaviour.

Anticipation replaces my indignation, as the walk from the cars parked under the shading tea-trees becomes a narrow track of sand, burning hot, through the dunes ... and there it is! A sandy beach stretching forever, powdery sand, whiter than the gritty yellow sand at St Kilda Beach, shallows to muck around in and, beckoning beyond the sand bar, the vast waters of the bay. On the shore, Mummy spreads baby oil or coconut oil all over herself – she gets the best rich golden tan. She, who does not like to swim, calls out to us to be careful and watches as, with my Daddy, I swim out to where the green tangy sea is icy-deep, and we race back; he wins, but watch out, Daddy – I am getting faster!



Me, Daddy, Janette

And someone takes a photo.

With our many friends at the beach, we have a picnic lunch. We compare and share goodies, try to keep the sand off the hard-boiled eggs and pieces of apple; make faces at the crunch of the grit, and eat it all with good appetite. Five-year-old Janette grizzles, the sea salt stings her skin, sand irritates. We tell her to be brave, reminding her the specialist says salt water and sunshine are good for her eczema. I keep her company in the shallows while the other children play with a beach ball.

Sometimes the men forget they are grown-ups and they take over, soccering the ball, showing off. The sun lower in the sky, it is time to make sand castles complete with moats and one last swim with dunkings.

I never want to leave here.

On the way home, with the car swerving to the beach road curves, the sun setting in glorious colours on our left, we sing along with the radio: 'Catch a Falling Star' (Perry Como), 'Tammy' (Debbie Reynolds), 'Day-O' (Harry Belafonte), 'Memories are Made of This' (Dean Martin) and 'Wonderful, Wonderful' (Johnny Mathis). Yes, wonderful.

Mummy usually makes a simple dinner, sometimes of fresh rye bread from Acland Street – made more delicious because the law forbids sale of fresh bread on Sunday – and continental frankfurts, which my mother calls *paruvki*; other times we have chopped Polish sausage scrambled with eggs. Yum.

Summer days merge into a golden haze as the holidays go by.

But there is one Sunday, a scary, puzzling Sunday. With the sun growing larger as it sinks towards the water, Janette and I put finishing touches to our sand castle. I hear a strange sound and, turning my head, I see my Daddy running towards me.

His face twisted in horror; the sound coming from him terrified and terrifying – I can't make out the words.

I follow the direction of his eyes.

Coming towards Janette and me is a lanky boy. His crewcut hair nearly white; his skin red from a day out in the sun. Stark against this red, a white pattern, painted on his chest in zinc-cream: a cross with hooked pieces on the ends.

Daddy has reached us.

Taking an aggressive pose, his hands go around us as if to protect us. From what is he protecting us?

As the boy passes, he rolls his pale blue eyes at Daddy.

'Daddy! What's wrong?'

'Nothing!' He shouts it, his face distorted, his eyes bulging.

Mummy has been watching and running.

Now she reaches us, all smiles gone. I see the terror in Mummy's eyes; she takes us in her arms and holds us close.

She is trembling. Daddy is trembling too.

He says, 'It's all right now – you are safe.'

Turning to Mummy, his eyes wide and glaring, he fiercely speaks the words as if a curse:

'NEVER AGAIN.'

FOUR: (How) may we know each other (?)

Insights into the tragedy of the human condition, the I and Thou, pose a continuing dilemma.

*Where one man's enlightenment is not necessarily another's,³⁵⁰
And loving all one's neighbours eludes the best of intentions.³⁵¹
Neither selfishness nor selflessness are sufficient to resolve conflict,
How do we develop a space for goodwill so that we all can flourish?*

Janusz Korczak implores us to work together.³⁵²

'We all are brothers and sisters, children of the same earth. We have been preceded by generations that shared a common destiny for good and evil – one long common path. We get light from the same sun and our crops are destroyed by the same hail. The same earth covers the bones of our forefathers. We have known more sorrow than joy, more tears than laughter, and neither you nor we bear the blame for this. Let us work together, let us educate ourselves together.'

Sholem Asch solicits via his characters:³⁵³

*When you are older you'll understand everything ... for yourself.
Until that time ... all you must strive for is to become a good man,
to love all men, do evil to nobody, keep straight and help others
whenever you can. That is ... the religion of all men
whether they are Christians or Jews. Do you promise faithfully?*

The Quran says:

*O Mankind! (God) created you from a single pair of male and female
And made you into Nations and Tribes, that you may know each other
not that you may despise each other ...³⁵⁴*

And a plea for civility in public discourse: from Israel's President Reuven Rivlin:

Each of us must ask ourselves, what is our part in this? Friends, we must not be silent. Silence is dangerous ... specifically silence about the erosion of shared values. We have to find the way, the language and words whereby we deal with difficult tensions between us. I ask you, for us, for all of us, to find new meaning and think about your words.³⁵⁵

May more people of all faiths and none,
move beyond the justifying use of
any one or all of the names of God
where the good of the one
tramples on the good of the other,
and the tradition of tit-for-tat weds us unhappily to
failure,
reprisal,
divorce.

Pastor Martin Niemöller³⁵⁶ – writing as an indictment of inactivity of
German Intellectuals during the Nazi regime:

FIRST THEY CAME FOR THE COMMUNISTS,
and I did not speak out—because I was not a communist;
THEN THEY CAME FOR THE SOCIALISTS,
and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist;
THEN THEY CAME FOR THE TRADE UNIONISTS,
and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist;
THEN THEY CAME FOR THE JEWS,
and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew;
THEN THEY CAME FOR ME –
and there was no one left to speak out for me.

Ultimately, can you and I find ways beyond they and us?
What is it that makes a life good?
And how is that different from a good life?
Don't we yet long for a Better World?
Not a perfect world but one filled with the (im)possible.
A life worth living; mine *and* yours.
Ours and theirs.

How do we achieve all that? So far not much good for all.
In these uncertain times where any 'lessons' of the past elude
does it make any difference what we do?

Sometimes Yes; sometimes No.

Still we try.

Meanwhile we

live in the present, remember the past.

Interpret: for ourselves and for those to come.

*Though in parts thirteen³⁵⁷ plus – what it means to be a
human being of integrity and honour – a mensch
(this Yiddish word corresponds to Mencius,
the great Confucian sage of China,
he who asserted the innate goodness of the individual,
acted upon by society) –
remains an unanswered question,
and though I do not believe in any God –
I find through these pages that I discern a something beyond knowing.
John Caputo³⁵⁸ expresses it for me:*

*... a dream, a desire, or a restlessness, a passion for the impossible ...
there is in Derrida, in deconstruction, a longing and sighing,
a weeping and praying, a dream and a desire, for something non-
determinable, un-foreseeable, beyond the actual and the possible ...
beyond the scope of what we can sensibly imagine.*

Yes, I do like the idea of a longing for the impossible.

A longing to love God whether He is there or not.

And if God is the infinite union of all contradictions including non-belief –
or if the right idea is God as a ‘white page’

which writes itself as we evolve

or if there is ‘... a struggling divine essence ... striving to merge with
our hearts just as the mystic is striving to merge with God’s’,³⁵⁹

or some other wondrous (non)being

or some aspect we may never (dis)prove,

yet the complexity and the dimensions blow our minds and challenge us:















to dare to know, love our lives

and to strive to better be
as if there is a God,
and with(out) a formula for the good of the one
and the good of the other,
after all who is it we talk to
when we talk to God
if not our longing for a better world.

The Golden Rule is a good place to start.

The Golden Rule Across The World:

Thirteen Sacred Texts + One More ³⁶⁰

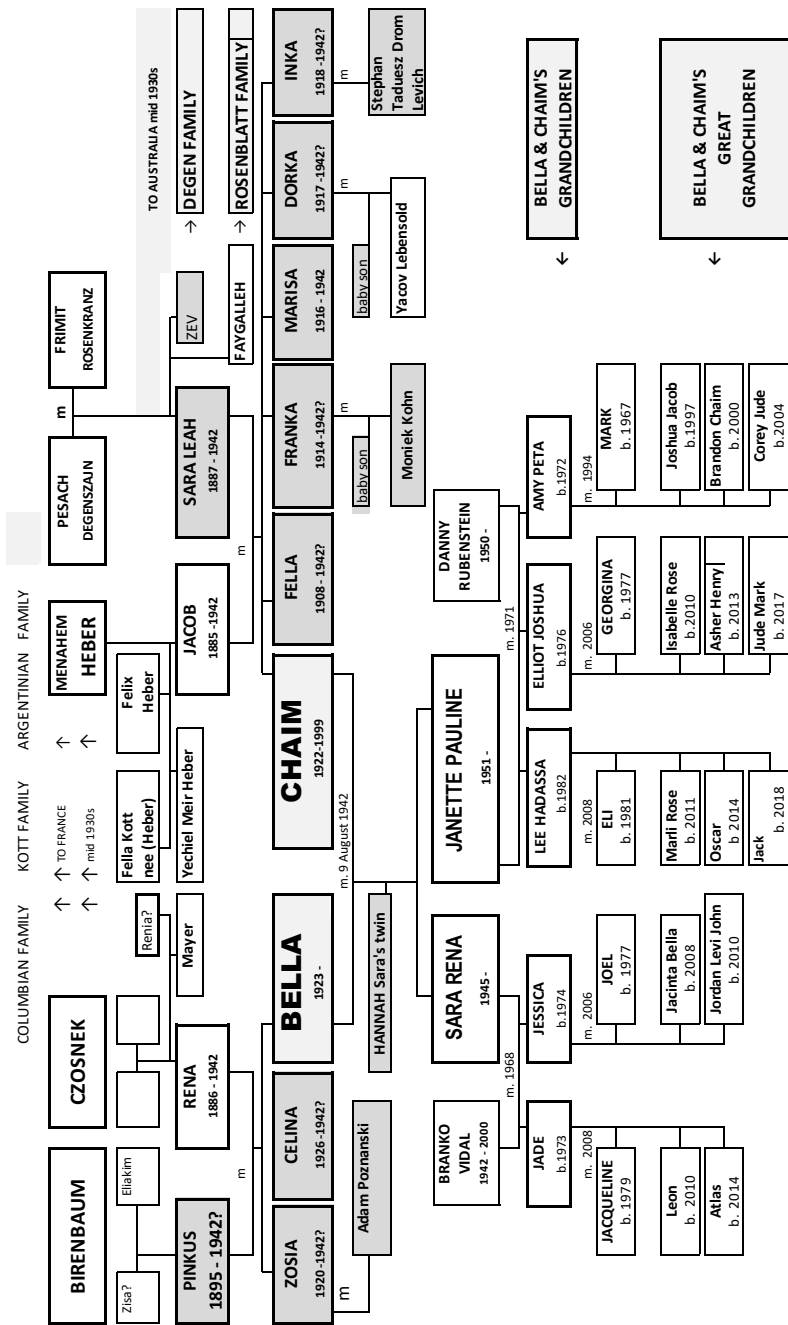
Bahá'í Faith: Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself. <i>Bahá'u'lláh</i> , Gleanings.	
Buddhism: Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful. <i>The Buddha</i> , Udana-Varga 5.18.	
Christianity: In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. <i>Jesus</i> , Matthew 7:12.	
Confucianism: One word which sums up the basis of all good conduct ...loving-kindness. Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself. <i>Analects</i> 15.23	
Hinduism: This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you. <i>Mahabharata</i> 5:1517.	
Islam: Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself. <i>The Prophet Muhammad</i> , Hadith.	
Jainism: One should treat all creatures in the world as one would like to be treated. <i>Mahavira</i> , Sutrakritanga 1.11.33.	
Judaism: What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it. <i>Hillel</i> , Talmud, Shabbath 31a.	
Native Spirituality: We are as much alive as we keep the earth alive. <i>Chief Dan George</i> .	
Sikhism: I am a stranger to no one; and no one is a stranger to me. Indeed, I am a friend to all. <i>Guru Granth Sahib</i> , p.1299.	
Taoism: Regard your neighbour's gain as your own gain and your neighbour's loss as your own loss. <i>Lao Tzu</i> , T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien, 213-18.	
Unitarianism: We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. <i>Unitarian principle</i> .	
Zoroastrianism: (Persia) Do not do unto others whatever is injurious to yourself. <i>Shayast-na-Shayast</i> 13.29.	
And one more: Existentialism: (Sartre) ³⁶¹ What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all.	

STILL NOT THE END ³⁶¹



*Clockwise from top: Heniek, Janette,
Basia, Sara. Taken around 1985*

FAMILY TREE



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the many people who have been part of making this happen including:

Dr Wesley Rouch for suggesting, in 1991, that I should write my stories;

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Danny Rubenstein for being like a son to my mother;

my children Jade and Jessica for taking me seriously;

and my sister Janette Rubenstein for all our discussions and for her view: ‘Well, if I wrote a book it would be completely different!’

GENERAL SOURCES

Guided by my parents' testimonies and supplemented by extensive research, my attempt to tell and verify their story brought me into contact with a vast body of historical record, memoir and analysis.

TESTIMONY OF HENRY HEBER

Interview conducted by Mr Philip Maisel at the Melbourne Holocaust Centre, as part of the Stephen Spielberg USC Shoah Foundation collection of testimonies. In 1995 my father gave his testimony. I was given a copy on tape which I have since had copied to DVD. The image and sound are poor. Though details and sequence of events occasionally differ from his sessions with me, I was able to confirm with him that I had recorded the events correctly. What is remarkable is being able to look at his face and hear his voice as he tells his story.

THE EARLY YEARS

Celia S. Heller's *On The Edge Of Destruction*, distilled from the memories and records of Jews pre-1939, parallels what I heard from my parents and their friends, and thus added depth to what my parents told me; through her musings, things I'd held in contempt were transformed. For example: the fact the Jewish synagogue is noisier than the Christian church is not a sign of disrespect (as I had taken it to be) but of being 'at-home'.

Chaim Bermant's *The Walled Garden* presents an insightful array of Jews and Jewish life that goes far beyond victim or hero.

Both these writers evoke the family as central to Jewish life.

THE WARSAW GHETTO PERIOD

It is evident many people writing about the Warsaw Ghetto period draw on the found archival documents plus survivor accounts such as

that of Marek Edelman, and Nazi records such as *The Stroop Report*. Kermish's *To Live With Honor And Die With Honor: Selected documents from the Warsaw Ghetto Underground Archives* covers a huge range of topics from a program of a children's play to studies on starvation, copies of Nazi edicts and minutes of meetings. These outpourings of feelings, thoughts, diarised events and research by inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto speak to us with an intensity undiluted by applied historical or ideological bias. More reliable than recollective memory, their immediacy demonstrates a lack of knowledge of the outside; as such, they are an aspect but not the whole picture. (Refer also endnote 165.)

Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum, is rich in detail, knowledge and immediacy.

The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow. Before purchasing a copy in 2015, I accessed it online on 20/9/2014 at <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/ghettos/acdiary.htm>

Documents on the Holocaust is an invaluable and comprehensive collection of German, Polish and Jewish documents, ranging from The National Socialist Programme (a.k.a. the 25-point Programme or the 25-point Plan) of 1920 to the Nuremburg Trials in 1947.

Books by Yehuda Bauer and Israel Gutman contain much detail and many archival photos, some of which are now available online.

Of the recent histories, particularly thorough is the work of the Polish Center for Holocaust Research database and website: <http://warszawa.getto.pl/index.php>; and *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City* by Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak. It contains maps that locate known services, official and clandestine, which indicate and are a tribute to the vibrancy of the ghetto.

Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning by Timothy Snyder: his approach to history and political theory is novel and controversial. He draws a distinction between occupation and colonisation. He warns that blaming ethnicity or the inherent nature of certain groups and applying collective responsibility, is a trap that leads to the 'abolition of political thought and the lifting of individual agency.' *Black Earth* (150). Rather, we need to maintain the State and civility for all.

Oxford Readers Nazism is a valuable overview and collection of extracts on National Socialism.

Neil Ascherson's *The Struggles For Poland*, a vibrant insight to Poland's spirit, takes the reader through its turbulent history: restoration of independence in 1918, horrors of Nazi and Soviet occupation, Warsaw uprising, the communist state, Solidarity.

GENERAL INTERNET SOURCES

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum History site:
<https://www.ushmm.org/>

Chicago, Illinois Newspaper Archives (1877–2000):
<https://newspaperarchive.com/us/illinois/chicago/>

Yad Vashem, The World Holocaust Remembrance Center:
<http://www.yadvashem.org>

Holocaust Research Project: <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/>

And the many Wikipedia sites are informative and give detailed citations.

THE DISPLACED PERSONS PERIOD

Yehuda Bauer's *Out Of The Ashes* and Mark Wyman's *DPs: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945–1951* made my father's unbelievable anecdotes suddenly real. Despite minor variations in detail, their facts, figures, and dates (actual edicts, records and diaries) are consistent with his. Where there is variance in figures, I indicate the range or use the 'safer' reference such as the Polish Center for Holocaust Research database. Any discrepancies are unintentional.

THE HUMAN CONDITION

There are many writers whose ideas influenced mine, provided affirmation of my views, or invoked a negative reaction. In the context of this book, Primo Levi, George Steiner, Hannah Arendt, Peter Gay, Hermann Hesse, Thomas Mann, Sholem Asch, John Caputo, Leon Feuchtwanger, and Frederic Grunfeld, among others, illuminated.

RELIGION

Having borrowed it from a cousin's bookshelf in the early 1990s, I was surprised to discover, in *This is My God* by Herman Wouk, that much that I'd taken to be part and parcel of so-called New Age thinking can be found in the Jewish tradition.

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We were lying there in the dark. Me and your daddy.
Unable to move. Eighteen months in a hole in the ground ...
I thought I would go mad. But I saw a white tablecloth ...



Bella and Chaim, the author's parents, were known as Basia and Heniek. For eighteen months from late 1943 they hid in a hole under the backyard workroom of a retired Polish policeman in a suburb of occupied Warsaw. In the claustrophobic dark, they waited while outside a world war raged.



Bella and Chaim is a testament to the human spirit. It embraces their memories and mingles them with fragments of the 1950s, the author's real-time journal entries, and the historical record; interspersed are musings on the light, dark and potential of being alive. After the total destruction of their way of life and the murder of their families, they were eventually liberated and migrated to Australia to make a new life.

"Many migrant stories have recorded atrocities during WWII. But to link the deep past with the recent past and the present, and to find themes that connect them all, that is fabulous." — Liliane Grace

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